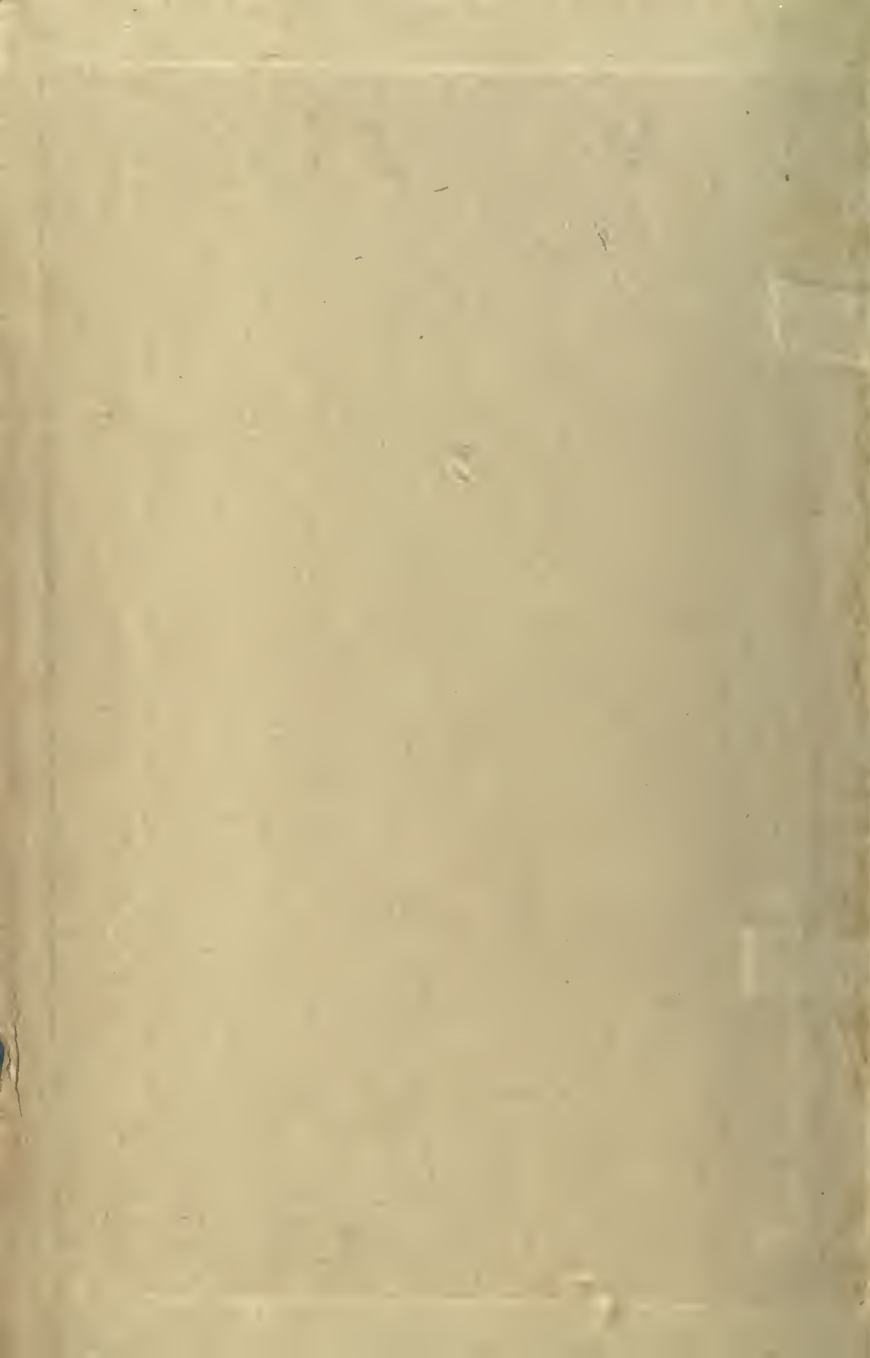


**DESBOROUGH
OF THE
NORTH WEST
FRONTIER**

JOAN SUTHERLAND



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AUTHOR OF
CAVANAGH
OF KULTANN

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DESBOROUGH OF THE NORTH - WEST FRONTIER

BY
JOAN SUTHERLAND

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THE HISTORY OF THE
CITY OF NEW-YORK
FROM 1609 TO 1801

BY JOHN B. HENRY

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To

REAR-ADMIRAL SIR W. REGINALD HALL,
K.C.M.G., C.B., M.P., etc.,

to whose work and courage England owes more
than she will ever know, this book is dedicated
by one who is proud to call him 'friend.'

LONDON.

February 1920.

Chapter I

THE monsoon, such of it as reached the north-west fringes of the great Indian desert, was three weeks overdue, and the parched earth was cracked and the leaves hung withered and brown on the trees. Fort Amrah, situated not far from Peshawur and the sword-cut of the Khyber, is never a place to be sought after at the best of times, being a mere handful of native houses, a bazaar frequented by all the scoundrels on their way to or from Peshawur and the North, a few Government buildings walled with mud and roofed with corrugated iron, and the Fort itself—a square bastion of a place built of red Agra stone, rising straight from the dry stones of an ancient moat. A red-hot furnace of a place scorched by the summer suns, ravaged by the bitter winds sweeping down from the Hindu Kush.

The garrison at Fort Amrah consisted ordinarily of a mountain battery, one troop of cavalry and two battalions of native infantry, while the civil population comprised Rose, the Deputy-Commissioner, Locke, his assistant, Kirkland, the Medical Officer, his wife

Marie, and just now the engineer who was building the canal a mile away over the sun-scorched plain.

Kirkland's home was a bungalow just to the north-west of the Fort, built of mud like all the other buildings and roofed with the same corrugated iron, and close by it on either side of the broad military road was the remainder of the European quarters; half a dozen other bungalows washed pink or yellow, the Club house used by civil and military men alike and a few hundred yards further on the white-washed sheds that did duty for a hospital.

The country round about lay open to the south and east, bare, sandy, cultivated only in patches, the trees a few stumpy acacias and tamarisk, the vegetation principally scrub. Marie Kirkland, who loved flowers and trees, had made valiant efforts to keep her garden green and shady and rejoiced in the possession of a beautiful mulberry tree that had so far resisted both the winter frosts and the scorching summer heats and some lilac and other flowering shrubs; but it was difficult work and often she was tempted to give it up.

The worst enemy Fort Amrah feared was drought, with its concomitant train of horrors, and every eye, Native or European, watched the progress of the Gulkor-Amrah canal that was in process of construction, with keenest interest. This canal, the result chiefly of repeated efforts on the part of the Commissioner and Deputy-Commissioner for the district, backed by the Governor of the Punjab, would inundate 30,000 acres,

and be the means incidentally of saving thousands of lives, and all three officials had made themselves highly unpopular over it. For only the merest apology for the monsoon reached Fort Amrah or the district immediately surrounding, and the country had to be content with a few capricious showers and thunderstorms.

This year had been a particularly trying one, and nerves were worn thin as threads and taut as fiddle-strings, and tempers were uncertain.

In Desborough's bungalow close to the irrigation works, if bungalow such a shed could be called, four men were gathered together dining as they had gathered every Tuesday evening for the last four years. Desborough, the engineer, bronzed, virile, good to look upon with powerful shoulders and the lithe movements of a panther; Vane, captain of the Battalion of Sikhs, tall, lanky, and white-faced with fever; Kirkland, equally tall but of heavier build—a very different type; Locke, younger by several years than any of the three and still retaining many of his boyish enthusiasms.

It had resolved itself, as usual, into a bachelor gathering, although Desborough had, equally as usual, extended his invitation very cordially to Marie Kirkland; and once more he felt at once sorry and relieved that she had refused, for he did not feel that his two-roomed shanty was quite the place in which to entertain even the most unexacting woman.

To-night, after a meal of tough boiled fowl, rice,

lukewarm Pilsener and a peculiar goat's-milk-pudding evolved by the old Pathan cook, every one seemed more on edge than usual. The room in which they sat was gloomy with half-closed chicks, and there were two punkahs of tattered calico which squeaked monotonously ; a square deal table where the four sat, a rickety cupboard, two armchairs of doubtful wicker comfort, two kerosene lamps that would presently be lit and smell vilely, a second table loaded with papers and a dog-basket in one corner, made up the furniture of the room, and there was nothing of beauty or comfort in it. The windows and outer doors were carefully closed, since the thermometer stood higher than usual, and the outer air was like the blast from a furnace.

The four men wrangled over the meal or became sulkily silent for want of any pleasant subject of conversation, and pushed back their chairs with a scrape when the remains of the meal were cleared away and coffee and pipes took its place.

No one seemed anxious to talk or indeed to do anything that might ease the situation ; grit, hot winds, and a sky of white-hot brass had taken the spirit out of them all. Desborough, in duty bound as host, suggested poker, and was met by a snarl ; while Locke, always ready to make himself agreeable, went into the one adjoining room and came back staggering under the weight of a big gramophone, much the worse for wear. His winding up of the instrument, and the starting of ' If you were the only girl in the world,' evoked a series of ungracious remarks, but the tune ran

on uninterrupted, and at its conclusion Vane leaned back on his chair and spoke.

‘Got a copy of some rag the extremists over at home run, last mail,’ he said. ‘They were all for runnin’ India for the Indians. Givin’ ’im a share in their own country—what!’

‘The *Signal*, was it?’ Locke asked, fingering another record rather doubtfully. ‘If so, I know the sort of thing. Know some people who think it’s the last word in justice and equity. Say Macdonald and Maclean and Tom Mann are noble patriots. Share for everybody. No oppression. Equal chance to all. Liberty, equality—and damnation!’

‘Mistaken sense of humour. Who’s going to give ’em their chances?’

‘That,’ Vane said with a laugh. ‘That’s left to the Powers of Darkness, I should think. Pity they spoil it all by being so damn-silly, because there’s heaps to be done.’

‘There’ll be heaps more to undo if Labour goes on as it’s going now,’ Kirkland remarked. ‘But I don’t know that it’ll matter much. Nothing matters for long.’

‘Oh, go to hell!’ Vane said, wholly amicable. ‘You’re not flyin’ the Red Flag, are you Kirks, old bean?’

‘I’d just as soon if things go on. All this twaddle of disinterested care, protection for the small nations and chivalrous ‘fighting for a principle,’ makes me sick. When we fought, we fought because we knew we’d be the next to be tackled if we didn’t. Britain

had got her own axe to grind, and it suited her to help France. If it hadn't she'd have helped Germany. That's all there is to it.'

'I beg to differ,' Vane said very distinctly. 'Britain went into this war with clean hands—like she came out. D'you understand?'

'It's your job to say so, of course,' Kirkland replied. 'I'm free to hold my own opinion, I suppose?'

'Any fool is,' Vane retorted, and Desborough cut in quickly:

'Stop it, you two. What the devil does it matter, anyway? I've no doubt you could both prove your case if you needed to. Get off tub-thumping, Kirkland! Your socialist propaganda doesn't attract us out here—we've too much of the raw material to handle. *Now*, what's the trouble?'

A yell, followed by a distant crash and a series of other yells swelling to a medley of human noises, cut short his words, and Locke jumped up with alacrity—he had only spent one hot weather at Fort Amrah.

'India for the Indians!' he said, grinning. 'Let's go and look at 'em enjoying it!'

Desborough glanced up from his idle turning of a month-old newspaper, and Locke went out, slamming the door hastily, to return about ten minutes later with the sweat running round his face from the exertion of hurrying.

'Only some fool coolies messing about that truck of scrap iron near the engine shed,' he said. 'Guggoo is laying into 'em.'

He named the queer little Hillman overseer, and Desborough nodded and threw the paper aside.

‘The I.L.P. would call that a gross case of misused authority,’ he said. ‘Pity they’re not here to see.’

‘I suppose they do occasionally ventilate a serious grievance,’ Kirkland said in a rather peculiar tone. ‘It is just possible that the other fella’s opinion is as right as one’s own.’

‘Oh, might be,’ his host retorted with a yawn. ‘Only in this case it’s not.’

Vane, sprawling lengthily in his chair, looked at Kirkland and shrugged his shoulders; nobody took much heed of personal remarks or behaviour the reverse of conciliatory, on such an evening as this. Kirkland himself, a big bulky Scotsman with black hair, rather prominent black eyes, close-lipped mouth and a clean-shaven face, was of a type that is sometimes admired, but he was no favourite with Desborough, who made no secret of his dislike; only the circumstances made acquaintance—even a semblance of friendship—possible; and as Kirkland returned the dislike it became a matter of interest to the other two, to watch and bet on a quarrel. Yet Kirkland was not a bad type, his chief fault being an overwhelming conceit, and neither Vane nor Locke disliked him; he was certainly clever, and it was perhaps the knowledge of his own brains that made him resent bitterly the lack of money which kept him in India when he longed for Harley Street.

Desborough had made his name in a profession that

has room for very few great men ; his work witnessed for him in remote as well as central places of the world, and Kirkland was bitterly jealous. He went off now with a brief good night to the three, and soon after Vane reluctantly dragged himself out of his chair and stretched languidly.

‘ What a life ! What wouldn’t I give to be walkin’ along Pall Mall and seein’ all the taxis whizzin’ to the theatres and the clubs ! This wilderness gets on a fella’s nerves—sand, stones and sun ; sun, stones and sand ! How long’ll you be here, Desborough ? ’

Desborough rose, poured out a farewell peg and held it out to Vane.

‘ Another eight or nine months, with luck.’

‘ I couldn’t stick it unless I had to,’ Vane said, subsiding on to the edge of the rickety table. ‘ White man’s burden and all that. Lust of empire—you know all the jargon both for and against—we all do. But I tell you, all the same, that neither sharin’ the burden nor all the lust of all the empires that ever were, would get me to stay one day longer in this cursed country unless I were forced to. I’ve no false illusions why I’m out here. I *know*. And it’s not one little bit of romance or idealism or any such thing. It’s just the sheer necessity to live. I can do it up here. We don’t have to do the Simla stunts, and even Lahore Christmas week needn’t be done. Anyway, here I am, and here I stick livin’ on my pay like a good little boy and watchin’ the other fellas getting Staff jobs ! ’

The words smacked of bitterness, but voice and eyes

were cheery enough and he laughed as he ended. It was Locke who spoke next.

‘Get your people to wangle things if you don’t like this part of the world.’

‘Who said I didn’t like this part of the world? Your imagination is leading you astray. As for my people—well, my father is a country parson with a big Rectory to keep up, and a boy and two girls to educate, and about £300 a year for the lot. Wangling isn’t done in our family, my lad!’

‘What part of the country is your father’s living?’ Desborough asked, more for the sake of making a remark than because he was particularly interested.

‘Crossways. Near Wroxholme. Know it?’

Desborough nodded.

‘Yes,’ he said briefly, but volunteered no further information and after a minute Vane too took himself off, leaving Desborough alone.

He stood for a minute or two regarding the thick sky rather doubtfully, the breathless heat of the air striking against his face like a tangible thing; there was no moon yet, and overhead only a few stars glimmered faintly, so overcast was the night. There was work for him to do, but he felt restless for some unaccountable reason, and even after he had re-entered the bungalow he did not attempt to sit down to the pile of papers that awaited his attention. His servant, Lehr Khan, had lit the tin lamp, and its evil smell mingled with the breathless heat of the night and made it dreadful; yet Desborough was too used to it all to be much dis-

turbed by bodily discomfort and gave no sign that it troubled him in the least.

Hayward, his assistant, had come in ; he could hear him in the little cupboard-like apartment that led off the living-room that was office, dining-room and study alike ; but he did not want Hayward. He hardly knew what he wanted—which was the reason of his uneasiness, for it was a state of mind to which he was an absolute stranger.

He lit a pipe and began pacing up and down the little room, trying to dismiss the foreboding of trouble that overshadowed him and concentrate on the work that was waiting ; but for some unknown reason his thoughts kept swinging back to subjects he had striven for years to forget, and refused to interest themselves on the matters in hand. The entrance of Hayward roused him, six-foot two of lean, clean-built Englishman, with a face tanned dark brown, blue eyes blood shot with much staring into sunlit distance, and clipped moustache bleached nearly lint white. He looked at Desborough, who brought his panther-like prowling to a standstill, and spoke in a pleasant drawl.

‘ Mail in ? ’

‘ No. Probably floods. Are you still working ? ’

Hayward nodded, and picking up some of the piled papers on the table glanced through them.

‘ I was looking through those calculations with regard to the water-pressure. We reckoned one coat of kunkur lime plaster half an inch thick, didn’t we ? Think it’s all right. By Jove, it’s warm ! ’

'Yes. You'd better go to bed. There'll be a good deal to do to-morrow with that new consignment to pass.'

Hayward nodded, stifling a yawn; made for the doorway, then stopped to stoop and pick up an open letter lying on the floor.

'This yours?'

Desborough glanced across the room.

'What is it?'

"Regina Hotel, Lahore—'Darling, when are you going to steal a day or two—can't you tell Marie you've business'—Good Lord! It's Kirkland's——" Hayward dropped the letter on the table as if he had been stung, and looked across at his chief.

'What a swine!' he said very softly. 'It's a woman's writing.'

For a moment Desborough did not answer, then he came across to the table, picked up the sheet, folded it, and putting it in an envelope slipped it into his pocket.

'I'll give that to Kirkland myself next time I see him,' he said non-committally, but Hayward was not satisfied.

'It's from a woman,' he repeated, 'Tell Marie—the fellow ought to be horsewhipped! I always hated him, the conceited, dirty-minded brute.'

'Steady, Hayward! Any man who deceived Marie Kirkland would be a swine, I grant you, but you don't know in the least whether what you're saying is true. You can't judge without some sort of proof.'

‘Isn’t that’—Hayward made a gesture of contempt—‘enough?’

‘Hardly. We’ve not read it. However, I’ll give it him and see how he looks.’

‘She’s such a darling,’ Hayward murmured, still frowning. ‘He ought to be on his knees to her.’

‘I agree. We all love Marie—and she’s worth it, but all the same you can’t be certain yet. D’you know it’s nearly twelve?’

Hayward nodded: he had supreme faith in his chief and strolled off to bed a few minutes later, leaving Desborough to sit down at the table, draw the evil-smelling lamp nearer and resolutely plunge into the mass of plans, calculations and costs that awaited his attention.

Chapter II

THE morning dawned in a haze of heat over the parched countryside, and before it was quite light Desborough was in the saddle and riding his Kabuli mare along the wide level of the Khyber Road ; what coolness there was—and that was only by comparison—would be gone directly the sun rose, and already the pale sky was thick with presage of the torment to come. Seen in the daylight, the countryside stretched levelly more or less away on all sides, save for a low ridge to the south-west, where a cluster of mud houses and a tiny square mud fort marked a native hamlet. Fort Amrah and the village about it lay to the north, the red Agra stone of the Fort itself and the colour-washed bungalows of the European quarter glaring against the dun-coloured earth. Even the trees and scrub were brown and dusty and gave no relief to the eye, dried-up by the long weeks of sun.

After a canter across a stretch of hard-baked earth used as a parade ground about a mile from the town, Desborough pulled up to a halt and sat staring out over the plain to the north.

The sun was nearing the horizon and far away in

the north and north-west a miracle of beauty would, in a minute or two, be seen ; he had waited for it every day for months and it never failed to stir him—and as he waited the habitual little frown between his brows faded, and something of the grimness about his well-cut mouth relaxed.

For the moment only the dull haze of the coming day wrapped the horizon in obscurity, but gradually, far away to the north, it seemed to clear even as the sky brightened from dusky grey to blue ; and high up and infinitely far away a rampart of snowy summits became visible, dazzlingly white and pure, towering thousands of feet into the azure of the heavens.

With a quick little intake of his breath Desborough took off his helmet and sat back in the saddle, and gradually the diamond-like whiteness of the snow was flushed with pale amber that deepened swiftly to flaming rose. Then a gleam of gold tinged the topmost peak with fire, and gradually the lovely radiance crept from summit to summit and the blazing splendour of the sun flooded snowfields and plain alike.

When the sun had fully risen Desborough gave a little sigh as tribute to the vanished glory, turned his mare's head, and rode back to the camp—a stretch of white tents, mud huts and corrugated iron roofs muddled together about the canal-works.

Bath and breakfast were soon over, and clad in worn khaki drill he went out to the work, found Hayward listening to Guggoo and stopped to speak, for Guggoo was talking at length and very earnestly,

emphasizing his points with many wavings of a piece of twisted wire. As his chief approached Hayward spoke.

‘I say, sir, Guggoo has got some extraordinary bee in his bonnet. I wish you’d listen and tell me what you think of it.’

‘What’s that? Guggoo isn’t given to romances. What is it? Speak on!’

Guggoo salaamed profoundly—not that he was given to salutations of courtesy; humility was not a characteristic of his, neither did he trouble overmuch about the white man whom he regarded—as a race—with utter indifference. Only Desborough, and in a smaller degree Hayward, were exempted, and with them Guggoo was another being, for Desborough was to him mother and father, son and master—and his word was the word of the gods.

He, Guggoo, was a little wizened man from some mysterious region of the Hills, thin to scragginess, brown and active as a monkey with stringy sinews of steel and whipcord, a ragged greyish-white beard, white hair hidden under a vast turban and bright eyes ablaze with intelligence beneath tufted white brows.

Nobody knew much about him; he had arrived at the first camp miles away when the works had first been started nearly four years ago, had demanded to see Desborough and been taken on as a workman for a week. In two months he controlled a gang, in six he was a foreman of many, in a year he had more authority over the whole camp than any one else save

the two engineers themselves, and what he did not know about the practical side of the work was not to be known.

Now, at Desborough's words he came closer and peered up into the other's face with his bright eyes ; still holding the wire and at intervals picked up a surveyor's tape and gesticulating as if measuring or complaining of measurements, for enemy eyes might be watching and Desborough Sahib would understand and respond to the pretence.

' Sahib, it is news that has come to me—never mind how, that is not for this hearing—but it is come, and it is true, and I beg that you will heed. Listen, Sahib ! Have you heard of Abdul Sher Kfazul ? Think, Sahib ! '

Desborough looked down into the brown wrinkled face, knitting his brows.

' Yes—no—what of him ? '

' He is cousin of the Amir. He hates we of the Raj. He prepared army there—far away.'

He waved one skinny arm carefully, not in the direction of the Khyber, but at the leisurely-moving coolies a few hundred yards distant, and went on.

' That is perhaps nothing. But he sends messages—he holds converse with those who fought the Raj—those whom the Raj has so lately beaten thus ! '

He flicked his whip in a peculiar manner, and the action was wholly significant.

' There is war brewing. They work and train and drill. There are rifles from far beyond the snows—

and they seek to quarrel ; oh, they seek very well.'

' You mean——? '

' They will come as those who come upon the Pamirs, Sahib ; but they will be sent by men of another land—men such as the Sahib Heilmann at the bazaar yonder when he would visit Sher Khan's wife.' He named an incident nearly six years old, known only to Desborough and a few others. ' And they wait the word, Sahib. They only wait the word.'

Desborough was silent a minute, staring at the sand, and Guggoo waited with that endless, patient waiting of the East. At last he raised his eyes and looked into the wizened monkey-face.

' What word, Guggoo ? '

Guggoo moved his shoulders and his hand with a queer expressiveness.

' I do not know, Sahib. Perhaps a mullah may preach a holy war ; perhaps a ghazi may win paradise by way of some widely known Feringhi ; perhaps the moon may be the signal, or the turn of the year ! One thousand things might or might not give the word—I am ignorant of the means, but I am sure of the end.'

' Will it be soon ? '

' I think not quite yet, Sahib . . . but it draws nearer . . . it draws nearer. And we who obey the Raj will do battle with our lives. May the Gods grant me days to see it ! Is it well spoken, Sahib ? '

His eyes gleamed with unholy glee and Desborough nodded.

‘It is well spoken, Guggoo. Get hence now to the gang, or they will grow lazier than before.’

Guggoo salaamed and departed, walking over the hot sand with an irresistible swagger, and Hayward looked at his chief.

‘That’s queer,’ he said. ‘What d’you make of it?’

Desborough’s expression was non-committal.

‘Can’t say—yet. I want you to meet me at the nullah in an hour.’

The Gulkor-Amrah Canal was fed from the Swat river some miles away, and emerged from it over a great reef that acted as a natural weir; below the reef some three miles further a regulator crossed the canal channel, protected at either end by fortified block-houses, and some ten miles further still a river crossed the canal’s path. It was this river which was giving trouble, and Desborough forgot both his own presentiments and Guggoo’s warnings as he went back to his bungalow, where his Kabuli mare Shireen awaited him.

The weekly mail was in, Lehr Khan informed him; but there was no time for letters now, and swinging into the saddle he cantered away from the bungalow, past the workmen’s camp and over the parched, stony earth to the works themselves.

The canal, graded with infinite care, followed the slope of the land from the foot-hills at a general decline of about one in twenty, and not more than a mile from Amrah must cross a river leading down from high ground—a mere trickle till the floods when it became a

raging torrent a hundred feet across, harmless enough to look at on this July morning.

The canal approached from north, crossing to south, and on the northern bank was carried by an aqueduct, banked high above the surrounding land for some distance on either side the river channel, the banks faced with strong masonry capable of immense resistance. One of the spans of the arches, built out from the south bank, looking as though it had been broken, stuck out jaggedly against the sky, and the sandy earth around was strewn with the débris of a big task. Great blocks of stone, tools, spares, bricks, a lime-kiln, sandheaps, a shed or two, and the little two-foot gauge train—all was a scene of apparent confusion and real order.

The air was full of sound—the grunting and snorting of the little shunting engines, the clatter of tools, the clang of rivets being driven into iron girders, the voices of the workmen and the long whine of a crane tipping earth by the ton. Overhead was the hot thick sky but faintly blue that would in an hour or so become a dome of torment ; around the wide scorched spaces, the tents and sheds and huts of the camp, and not much more than a mile away the gleam of the colour-washed bungalows and the big red fort of Amrah.

Desborough slipped from the saddle, handing the mare over to a servant, and made his way to the actual scene of action, finding there the man he was looking for ; a stocky, red-haired Scot named Macpherson, who was the foreman in charge of the European workmen, of whom perhaps twenty were engaged upon the canal

works. Macpherson was not given either to enthusiasm or depression, but now his tufted eyebrows nearly met in a heavy frown as he greeted his chief ; Desborough glanced at once at the great welter of stone, brick and sandy earth heaped by that unfinished arch, then spoke.

‘ Still won’t hold ? ’

‘ It came down with the first test we gave it,’ the Scot answered in a deep growl. ‘ ’Tis the worst piece we’ve hit yet.’

‘ It means taking the stone further back still ; come with me.’

Together they examined the crumbling earth. Rivers usually eat their way through the land in low and narrow valleys, broadened enormously in flood-time, and as it is a question of carrying canal or railway over them by aqueduct or bridge the approaches have to be very strongly built and riveted owing to the flood-pressure. This particular river possessed banks that sloped and crumbled, and Macpherson had been so far beaten by the nature of the ground at the place where the masonry was supposed to stop. Meanwhile the floods would soon be upon the land, and the dry watercourse be turned into a shouting torrent from the hills, running all to waste, while the peasants starved for the crops their parched land would not grow.

Over and over again had the embankment been strengthened ; over and over again this particular twenty yards or so had given way, so shifting were the foundations ; and Desborough, knowing the need for

haste if the floods should not catch them unawares, thought and dreamed of little else.

Not till the long blazing day was over did the memory of Guggoo's words return to him, and then as he rode back into Fort Amrah to dine at the club his thoughts became busy with that strange story. Guggoo knew more than he chose to say ; and Guggoo did not lie to his own particular Sahib ; Desborough knew that, and therefore heeded the vague remarks more than he would have heeded the well-proven statements of any other native of his acquaintance. The mention of Heilmann, the Prussian writer, whose strange disappearance had well-nigh distracted two Governments and almost caused a rupture of diplomatic relations between England and Germany, had supplied him with a clue. Was it possible that Germany still plotted against the British rule in India ? Was it possible there was any serious danger from those vast high plains beyond the barrier of the Hindu Kush ? And if so, where was the connection with the canal ? For in some way connection there must be, or Guggoo would not have troubled himself about the matter. There was something more in this than he, Desborough, understood.

He was still thinking about it when he entered the club and met Captain ' Toby ' Presscott of the —th Sikhs and his relative by marriage, who rose from a long cane chair as he appeared and welcomed him with a friendly thump on the shoulder.

' Well, old thing ? All serene ? '

Desborough nodded.

'More or less,' he said. 'Hi, khitmutgar! two pegs——'

He dropped into a chair, stifling a yawn.

'I promised Kirkland we'd stroll round presently,' he remarked when dinner was over. 'What a queer type he is for Marie to have married.'

'Yes. Bit of a bounder. However, that can't be helped, and he's clever enough at his job. By the way, what about that tourist—scribbler—globe-trotter or whatever he is, that you spoke to me about. Is he here?'

'Comes to-morrow. Wants to see things. You know the sort. Anyway, we've to see him round and show him about. Friday's open day, so we can run him through the Khyber, and Saturday he might accompany my battalion on a route-march. We'll go to the hills. That'll learn him something about India!'

'Where does he come from?'

'Heaven knows. I'll be able to tell you more to-morrow. Come on. We'd better be moving.'

They strolled along the road that led to the Kirklands' bungalow, passing a water-man sluicing the road with water from the goat-skin on his back, passed a half-dozen bungalows and reached their destination about a quarter-past nine. Washed pale pink it stood behind its rough wall in the midst of a garden that struggled gallantly to be always green; a patch of rough grass, many rose trees, a mulberry tree or two and some fluffy tamarisk bushes.

They were met by a grave, bearded servant who ushered them into a long room with slits of windows high up in the green-washed walls, the floor covered with matting, the furniture mostly white cane, colour supplied in the big cushions of green, scarlet, gold and blue. A baby-grand pianoforte stood across one corner, giving an air of opulence to the whole room; and several photographs in silver frames, a silver bowl full of roses, and a fair number of books, redeemed the apartment from bareness and gave it a look of home.

For a moment it seemed as though the room was empty; then from a lounge at the end a slender little figure rose and held out a hand in greeting.

‘Captain Presscott—Jim—how nice to see you both!’

Her voice was very soft and clear, and in the black evening gown she looked dangerously fragile; yet for two hot weathers she had stayed in Fort Amrah by her husband’s side and made something of a home for the lonely and hardworked men whose work forbade them leave. She played well and spoke the vernacular fluently, managed her household with care and efficiency and was rewarded by possessing a husband who never troubled about her at all. Keith Kirkland’s senses had been attracted by Marie’s daintiness and his pride pleased by her looks and charm; but now, after seven years of married life, he had grown tired of her and to a man of his temperament that meant the end. Yet no one knew whether things were wrong or not; they only guessed, and it was not through

Marie that they did even that. She had many men friends and could have had most of them as lovers had she so chosen ; but she did not choose, and friendship alone is a poor substitute where love should be.

She lay back in her chaise-longue after seeing her two guests comfortably established near by, explaining her husband's absence and making his excuses : ' He will be back very soon. He told me to tell you so,' and then asking with no feigned eagerness after the canal's progress.

" Keith tells me you are having trouble still with the embankment. How very worrying ! '

' We shall get it before long. Guggoo believes he has found it. This afternoon ride over with us and see the work. You'd be interested, I think.'

She nodded, watching Desborough as he talked, with lustrous grey eyes darkly lashed ; she was very nearly beautiful with her delicate features, golden brown hair and fair skin. The air of pathos never quite absent even when she laughed, and a worn look about her mouth and eyes at times just made her fall short of real beauty. Sensitive, highly-strung, fragile as she was, Marie Kirkland possessed a courage and spirit equal to any man's, as even Keith her husband, egotist as he was, was forced to admit when some unforeseen occurrence tested her ; and perhaps it was this quality of mutual courage that had drawn her and Desborough together and made them friends.

Kirkland came in presently and they talked for a

while on matters connected with the general work of the place, then Presscott mentioned the expected visitor.

‘I hear we’ve a guest to trot around,’ he said. ‘What’s the news relating to him? What’s he coming for and who is he?’

Kirkland lit a cigar and swung his feet on to another chair; he had ignored his wife entirely during the previous conversation and it was little matters of behaviour such as this that made Desborough desire to kick him.

‘A man by the name of Ramsay Burke; writer-fellow and would-be politician. He’s clever—what, Presscott?’

Before Desborough could stop him, Presscott repeated his remark.

‘I said ‘like our friend here.’ More of that later. Well?’

Kirkland glanced at Desborough from beneath heavy lids and went on speaking:

‘Ramsay Burke has come into money and a place, somewhere. I forget what part of England. He’s thinking of entering the political arena and I fancy he’s writing some book or other. Rotten nuisance his coming at all, but it’s got to be put up with. Anyway, I’ve orders to take him round and show him all he wants to see.’

‘Is he staying here?’ Desborough asked of Marie, and she made a little gesture of assent.

‘Of course yes! There is nowhere else. He may be quite agreeable in spite of our prejudice.’

‘I hope to goodness you’ll use a little judgment with regard to him,’ Kirkland said sharply. ‘You are given to promiscuous friendships, I know, but this man may or may not be desirable. Be good enough to remember—if you can.’

Marie, turning her head a little against the blue brocade of a cushion, looked across at her husband.

‘I shall endeavour to treat him as you wish him treated, Keith,’ she said, a hint of dignity in her voice. ‘Are you going to show him the canal, Mr. Desborough?’

Desborough got up from his chair and went across to her, holding out his cigarette case; he was so angry that he felt for the moment physically incapable of sitting still.

‘Won’t you smoke?’ he said. ‘Yes, I shall have to show him the canal, I expect. Though there is not much to see yet. Why don’t you ride over with him? Then you can see the work.’

‘I should love to. I’ve wanted to see it so long, haven’t I? That would be Thursday or Friday, I suppose. Then I will arrange to do that.’

‘What are you arranging?’ Kirkland’s voice cut in as Desborough bent to strike a match. ‘Go to the canal? Nonsense. You wouldn’t be interested and I prefer to show Burke the place myself. Please don’t try to make plans for me, Marie. I prefer to make my own.’

Marie did not answer and for an instant there was silence in the room, then Desborough struck a match

sharply and Presscott began to speak very fast about the first thing that came into his head.

Holding the match for Marie to light her cigarette, Desborough saw his hand was shaking, and Marie saw it too, for she raised her eyes to his face and looked at him with a look that sent the blood drumming in his ears. He was very angry, and for a moment or two he dared not trust himself to speak, and Marie felt a sudden tremor run through her as she met the blaze of his eyes. She was used enough to Kirkland's treatment, but here was one who was not ; acting on an impulse to screen his palpable anger from her husband, the reason of which she did not stop to fathom, she touched his arm, speaking quickly.

'Some other time, then. For I do want to see the works very much.'

He threw away the match and sat down by her chair, and Marie, who could not but hear Presscott's chatter, went on talking, for she knew that he was raging at his inability to help her, and she did not wish her husband to notice his indignation.

It was so evident to Desborough that she dreaded any approach to a scene that he made a great effort and took her cue as she so obviously desired he should, but his hands were still trembling with that hard-held rage as he lit a cigarette for himself, and she saw him and gave him a look that showed her gratitude rather more clearly than she knew.

Presscott was talking of the end of Desborough's job, and Kirkland asked him what his future plans

were himself, and Desborough shrugged his shoulders.

‘Goodness knows! The finish of the canal is an uncertain quantity. I suppose I shall stay in London for a bit.’

‘You’re lucky,’ Kirkland said not without bitterness. ‘And as you’ve no one but yourself to consider you could afford to do as you like. That’s where an unmarried man has the pull.’

Desborough looked at him, made no reply, and in a few moments got up to go; but as he rode back to his hut through the hazy moonlight he spoke his thoughts aloud and they were not complimentary to Kirkland.

Chapter III

A THUNDERSTORM breaking over Fort Amrah a week later brought a brief hour of torrential rain, and going to the works the following morning, Desborough found blades of green visible where all had been parched earth the previous night, and weeds sprouting amongst the stones as if magic had been at work. All going well, a solid foundation having at last been found for the aqueduct pillars, the shower had put every one into better spirits for the day's work and there was no trouble as the morning went forward. Gangs of coolies swarmed over the raw ends of masonry and embankment, shovelling earth and stones into the little trucks that a minute and noisy engine shunted to and fro on a two-foot-gauge line, and the overhead crane groaned and snorted as it travelled slowly along its lines, swinging a great block of stone toward the half-finished archway. Everywhere were men, donkeys and machinery; all around noise, and Desborough, giving an order to one of the overseers, felt some of his anxiety lightening, for solid ground had been found and the last stretch of the canal was begun. He intended to ride up to the dam when the sun had

gone down a little, for he wanted to inspect the sluices and have a word with the engineer in charge, who lived in a bungalow close by the weir with his wife and four children. He had thought a good deal over Guggoo's words, and it occurred to him that it would not be amiss to inspect the whole place ; so about five o'clock he rode away from Fort Amrah to the north-west, following the track of the canal by a rough road till five or six miles away he drew near the lower foot-hills where they rose abruptly from the stony plain.

There for a while the river was still invisible, and the road climbed steadily, winding in and out of rocks till a sharp turn brought him in sight of the concrete canal bed twisting round the base of a hill.

Presently the track left the canal bed and he lost sight of it for several hundred yards, coming out on a well-made footpath to see just ahead of him the dam so recently constructed. This side was a small sheet of water with a spillway at the side high enough to be useful only in times of excessive flood, in the dam rose the tops of seven sluice gates closed completely now, while at either end stood a square block-house of the same red Agra stone, loop-holed and impervious to anything except high-explosive shell.

A bungalow built of mud and roofed with corrugated iron spoke of the presence of a white man, and one or two native bungalows stood at a little distance. Otherwise all was desolate, the only significant link with civilization being the posts carrying the telephone wire

that dwindled into the distant haze across the gently rolling country to the east.

The sound of the horse's hoofs brought forth a shrill barking from the bungalow's vicinity, and a moment later, as Desborough rode up, the engineer in charge of the sluices came out on to the verandah—a big, white-bearded Englishman with steady grey eyes under heavy brows and a look of grave patience about his face.

He shouted to a servant to take Desborough's horse and invited him indoors not without a touch of eagerness, for India is hard on her non-commissioned ranks, and this man had served her for thirty-five years. His wife came at his call, a thin little woman a year or two his junior, mother of the four boys and girls, who, born in India, had perforce to be brought up there, because the pay was not sufficient to send them home. Desborough knew the history of this couple—a common enough one, and he sat down in the little parlour, as Mrs. Steevens loved to call it, and drank tea and ate Huntley & Palmer's biscuits and talked; the only service he could do the patient little woman with her tired eyes and faded skin,—white visitors were rare enough to make their arrival a God-send.

Mrs. Steevens had first come to India many years ago as lady's maid to the wife of the General Commanding the Peshawur district, and had married the young engineer thirty-three years ago. She had spent those thirty-three years loyally by her husband's side, had brought up her children in a sober and goodly

fashion—no mean achievement in such circumstances—and looked forward to nothing better than dying in some one or other of the remote places where her husband might be stationed. Desborough gave her what news he could of England and Cambridgeshire—he happened to know her native village, though he had not visited it for some eight or nine years—and then bade her farewell and went off with the man himself to inspect the works. All there was well; the guard-houses needed men and ammunition, but these could at any moment be rushed up from Fort Amrah or Peshawur and would be sent before the opening of the canal; the actual canal works were all they should be, the telephone was in perfect condition, the water neither too low nor too high for the time of year. His inspection over, he prepared to leave, but when he was once more in the saddle he did not at once ride off, but sat staring out towards the tumbled greyish-brown of the foot-hills, while Steevens waited beside him, guessing there was more to come.

He was right, for Desborough's gaze left the hills and came round to him as the question was put.

‘Have you heard any rumours of trouble brewing over there?’

The old man stroked his beard; he had hoped to be asked something of the sort, but began his reply cautiously nevertheless.

‘Well, sir, I have—on and off. But I don't think more so than usual. My boy Robert—he's working on the railway near Peshawur—came over for twenty-

four hours ten days ago and he says there's underground talk. The natives seem to be a bit restless, but that might be anything. I've heard nothing definite except that an old mullah came down the Pass and was preaching over at Sarak village. That might mean anything, sir, or nothing."

'H'm. Yes. Well, keep your eyes well open, Steevens, and report by telephone every evening to me. We shall be getting the floods almost any day now. Good evening.'

He nodded and rode off, reaching Fort Amrah just as the hot night fell, and on the steps of the club met Rowe, the District Officer, looking like a thundercloud.

'Been a row in the native quarter,' he said. 'Some old mullah's been poking his nose about preaching and jawing to the people. Sounded pretty seditious according to the report brought me, and as there's been a scrap and a trooper was wounded and a ryot killed, I've clapped the old brute into cover for the night. I'll see what he has to say for himself in the morning.'

Guggoo's mention of a sign flashed into Desborough's mind, but knowing Rowe's opinion of any native information said nothing, contenting himself when he arrived at his own bungalow by writing a letter to the G.O.C. of the Peshawur district, who was a friend of his and knew the country and its people in no mean way.

Two days later Mr. Ramsay Burke arrived ; a thin, eager-eyed little man with a fine head and ragged moustache, who wore turn-down soft collars, impos-

sible tweeds, and looked as though his fiery spirit were eating through its frail envelope. He was received with every courtesy, was shown all about Fort Amrah by Rowe, entertained by Marie and her husband and then handed over to Desborough, who took him to the canal works, showed him all he wished to see and found himself more and more puzzled by his visitor's reason in coming at all. That evening, the last of Burke's stay on the Frontier, the little man, quite easily seeing his host's perplexity, opened the subject frankly.

'Mr. Desborough,' he said, 'you're wondering what's brought me here. I know. I've seen it and I don't wonder. And I'm going to tell you. I was brought up as a carpenter, but I always wanted to write and I dabbled more or less in journalism till my father died and then I came into his bit of money—he'd been a publican and made a tidy sum—I determined to go into politics. Don't mistake me. I don't mean to stand yet awhile. There's plenty of work to be done that needs doing badly, first. That can wait. You've heard of the *Daily Word*? Well, that's mine. It doesn't fit in with your schemes, I know, or your way of thinking. I'm for the under-dog, Mr. Desborough, now and all the time. I don't consider I've any real right to that money—I don't hold with any inherited capital—and so I use it for the work and the work only. For the last year or two I've been about the world studying the labour conditions and the grievances, and I'm ending up here. You're all for Imperi-

alism, I know. But it's got to go, and I'm going to do my best that it shall. The war was fought to free the world of tyranny, to set small nations and helpless people free. Well—we're the worst example. Look at Ireland! And what right have we got out here? Don't mistake me, though. I'm aware India's safe with us, but it isn't a question of safety, it's a question of right. I've been studying things out here too and I admire a very great deal. But it's all against what I'm working for. The under-dog. We've got to give freedom, education, better conditions, self-government. We've got to take from the rich and give to the poor. We've got to set up a really representative government. I sound a trifle anarchical to you perhaps, but I'm not that. You've got to have discipline and rulers, I grant you, but it must be the rulers from the people, the rulers chosen by the people, supported by the people. The people must govern themselves and the countries unite in one vast community of industry and policy. Conditions are still appalling in some industries. Let England put her own house in order before she preaches so much of her duty to the Empire. I'm out for a fair chance for everybody, and it's because I want to be fair to myself as well as other people that I decided to travel a bit before I made any big move. But it's the under-dog, Mr. Desborough, the under-dog, first, last and all the time!

The little man ceased abruptly, took out a large handkerchief and wiped his face, then sank back

in his chair and stared at his host, his great eyes ablaze, his thin worn face lit up by the fervour of his beliefs. It was impossible for Desborough to agree with him, but equally impossible not to respect his sincerity. To his way of thinking, England's doctrine of Imperialism was basically at fault because he considered that it upheld the principles which Germany had so disastrously advocated. To him nationalism was a crude thing, to be deplored, blocking the progress of humanity, causing dissensions and even injustice, breeding the hideous spirit of militarism, affording a pretext for coercion, annexation, fungoid-like growth of a centralized power.

To Desborough such a point of view was beyond comprehension, but he recognized its danger and its modicum of truth; given a regenerated humanity and a world purged of ambition and self, such doctrines would be ideal, but so long as human nature remained human nature, so long would such theories fail when they came to be practically applied. Yet Ramsay Burke was absolutely sincere and he spoke out of a knowledge of his class that Desborough did not, and never could, possess, and Desborough respected him and recognized that such sincerity coupled to such a personality might be a very dangerous thing.

He pushed the tobacco over to him, poured him out a long drink and put a brief question.

'You know that India would be torn to rags by fifty factions to-morrow if we relaxed our hold ever so little?' he said, and his companion nodded.

‘That’s so. Any country has got to go through the pangs of birth before it comes to full life. Look at Russia. If you hold back all the future because of a present trouble you hold back all progress. We’ve good authority for that. St. Paul knew it.’

‘You must make a people fit for government before you let them govern.’

‘That’s so again, but spoon-feeding won’t do it. Look at your average Hindu! Doesn’t he agitate for a place in his own country? Isn’t it fair and right that he should have it? He’s got a brain. He can learn quickly and he’s a patriot. Why do we refuse him a share in the government of his own land? We who profess to lead the world in the qualities of justice and humane treatment of others?’

Desborough took up the matches and regarded them intently.

‘Have you ever read Rudyard Kipling’s *Head of the District*?’ he asked.

‘No. What’s that got to do with it?’

‘It answers your question rather well, I think.’

‘I’ll read it. But look here, Mr. Desborough, I’ve come up from Madras recently . . . a few weeks ago. What I saw there shocked me and should shock any decent man. There are hundreds of workers housed—kennelled would be better—under conditions no better than slavery. Where does the divine right of Imperialism come in there?’

Desborough moved a trifle uneasily; like many men of action, he was not an adept at argument and Burke’s

power of words bore him down. After a minute he spoke rather slowly, thinking his thoughts aloud as they came.

‘You’re thinking of the East in the terms of the West,’ he said. ‘To you such crowding and poverty is a horrible thing. Grant that you are in a degree right, yet how would native government improve matters?’

‘Education would improve them.’

‘Yes, but the education of a great Empire—India is comprised of many nations—is not the work of a year or a decade. It is the work of centuries.’

‘Therefore you would say it is not to be accomplished? You would go on in the old bad way because a new way held difficulties and was the work of many lifetimes? That’s not the road of progress, Mr. Desborough.’

‘I’m not sure,’ Desborough said, gazing at the pipe he held, with absent eyes, ‘I’m not sure that progress as you and I think of it, is the same thing. I’m not sure that your progress is even a very desirable thing. I’m not a good arguer, Mr. Burke, but I believe my ideas are wiser than yours. The population of India is about four hundred millions of people. When you speak of the educated Indian you speak of about one quarter of a million—nearly all belonging to one of two races—the Mahratta or the Bengali. Now the Bengali is despised as no better than a low animal by the fighting races of the North, and the Mahratta is feared by the oppressed races of the South. If you

give the political privileges you have been talking of to them, you will have the other three hundred and three-quarter millions in a state of ferment and misery.

‘The South lives in dread of a return of the Brahmin rule—the Mahrattas are chiefly Brahmins—which they regard as tyranny of the worst type; and so it is. The North await Bengali rule merely to give an exhibition of what strong men can do when weak men are put over them. Mr. Burke, you want to help the weak and I admire your desire and your sincerity, but your scheme for India will help nobody. You have had a superficial glance at a few places in the whole continent—what does that tell you? You’ve made the acquaintance——’

‘I’ve made the acquaintance of many intelligent and well-educated men, Mr. Desborough. They’ve known my opinions and they’ve talked to me in a way they wouldn’t talk to an official. And if you’ll forgive my saying so, your arguments are all beside the point. You argue from the platform of expediency, I argue from the platform of right. If you come down to hard facts, there you are—and you can’t get beyond it. I’m out for the right as I see it, and in the long run expediency has got to give way because right is the only foundation for human well-being. It’s not right to enslave a vast number of fellow-beings, however plausible the pleas for such enslavement may sound. It’s not right to hold India and deny it full representation. It’s not right to deny any country the free expression of its ideas and desires.’

He broke off on a high note of rhetorical earnestness, wiped his forehead with a white silk handkerchief and leaning his elbows on the rickety table looked across at his host. There was no doubt about the man's sincerity ; it rang in his voice, flamed in his eyes, proclaimed itself in every action of his over-driven hardly-treated body. He was the stuff of which martyrs are made, and Desborough respected him accordingly ; a respect not untinged with anxiety.

Lehr Khan's entrance with a tray bearing whisky, soda-water bottles and glasses prevented the conversation being immediately renewed, and Desborough giving him some order for the morning the man salaamed profoundly and withdrew, not however before he had cast a keen glance on his master's guest.

Hardly had he left the room than Burke spoke fiercely.

' That's not a pleasant sight, Mr. Desborough ! No man should show servility to his fellow-man. Let him free himself and respect himself ! '

But Desborough's patience was growing short and he interrupted with scant courtesy.

' It is just because Lehr Khan is a free man and does respect himself that he can afford to show respect to others,' he said. ' We disagree fundamentally, I'm afraid, Mr. Burke, and I must ask you to excuse me if I suggest we both turn in. You've had a hard time and I have to be up at five. Say when ! '

He handed the glass across the table, poured out his own drink and leaned back in his rickety cane chair

with a quickly checked sigh, for he was exceedingly tired and the stifling heat had worn nerves and temper thin.

Burke, to do him justice, bore no malice for the interruption or the curtness of his host's manner ; he was far too big a man to be troubled by petty personal matters, and he drank his peg and went off to his bare room no whit ruffled in temper and no whit changed in opinion

Chapter IV

A FORTNIGHT later Marie Kirkland fell ill ; not an illness that claimed for her the sympathy given to a person in violent pain or the anxiety for one in danger of death, but a low feverish disorder, a general malaise that wore down her never robust constitution and made life at Fort Amrah a daily martyrdom.

Kirkland took her in hand as he would have done any other sick person with neither more nor less sympathy, and talked about her going to the Hills, and Marie herself, sweetly reasonable, awaited his decision and grew paler and thinner day by day. Her body longed for home with the longing of a sick person ceaselessly, piteously, yet her mind dreaded leaving Fort Amrah while Desborough was there. She faced the truth or what she knew of it as she lay in her darkened room one blazing afternoon about three weeks after Mr. Burke's visit had terminated ; she was not happy with her husband ; no woman like herself, sensitive and full of delicate imagination, could be, and Desborough stood to her for all the protection, consideration and understanding that Kirkland did not give her. She knew that if Desborough had been

her husband instead of Kirkland, she would not lie here ill and sad ; she realized that half her indisposition arose from mental distress, and facing the matter out that distress deepened.

Towards tea-time Kirkland came in, dust-covered and thirsty, took her temperature, muttered a vexed remark and sat down in a basket-chair thrusting out spurred and whitened top-boots.

‘ Hellish place this is,’ he said, savagery in his tone. ‘ The whole country’s cursed ! Wish to goodness I could get out of it. Anyway, you’d better go. It’s no earthly good keeping you here, for you get worse instead of better. I’ll write to-night to Murree and get you rooms somewhere there.’

It had come then. Marie closed her eyes for a minute, then grasped at the nearest thought for speech.

‘ Keith—the money. Can we afford it ? ’

He made a movement of impatience.

‘ Of course we can’t afford it ! You know that as well as I do, but there it is. You are not fit to stay down, ill as you are. I daresay we can make it up some other way. Perhaps you will rouse yourself and make an effort when you get into the cool. Certainly you seem unable to do so here.’

A faint colour crept into Marie’s face ; Kirkland’s habit of using a double-edged weapon was none the less effective because it was familiar, and she was powerless before it. Seeing the flush he spoke again, still watching her.

'Murree is the best place, I think. Three months.'

She nodded.

'Yes, Keith. I am sorry to give you all this worry and expense, but for once the hot weather is too much for me. I suppose—' a sudden boldness possessed her—'I suppose it would be out of the question to go home?'

'To go home? Good God, what an idea! My dear child, I'm not made of money.'

'I know, I know. Only sometimes, Keith, I feel I can't bear it out here any longer. Oh, it's silly, I know, but—but it's there and I fight it in vain.'

Kirkland rose from his chair, passed a hand over the sleep blackness of his head and threw back his shoulders with a little movement of conscious strength hardly calculated to comfort the frail girl on the bed before him.

'Really, Marie, at times you utterly amaze me!' he said. 'You bewail the expense of three months at Murree and almost at the same moment you suggest going home. I'm afraid you will have to put up with Murree. It's as much as I can manage this year. Now try to rouse yourself to a little interest in life and get your arrangements made. You had better go at once. I will wire for rooms.'

The flush had faded again and her face was transparent in its pallor; she looked so fragile that Kirkland's professional anxiety was aroused and he spoke with a certain sharpness.

'Don't feel faint, do you?'

‘ Oh no. I am all right, thank you. Only—there is no great need to go so quickly, is there, Keith? Surely you needn’t wire? ’

‘ Better go at once. If I’ve got to find the money, I may as well do it at once. It’s like a furnace here. Don’t forget to take that draught.’

He nodded and went out of the room, leaving Marie to lie with closed eyes facing her future, and wondering whether there was no way out of life as it was. Her husband’s constant references to expense tried her sorely, for she knew that she was a good and careful housekeeper and a very inexpensive wife; Keith had a small private income and his salary, they should be comfortably off, yet were for ever short of money. She had puzzled over it often, but he gave her no encouragement to ask, and she was like many women over-sensitive where money was concerned and hated to be reminded that every penny she spent came out of his pocket.

She took the draught he had given her and presently fell into a doze between sleeping and waking, when she thought herself back at Applegate, the home of her girlhood, with its rolling fields, its river winding through the water-meadows, and the hills rising and ever rising to the north; she had not realized her happiness then, so she told herself.

Applegate was a farm and her father, the younger son of a cadet branch of a good house, a farmer who had learned his work very thoroughly and knew the value of science in dealing with the land.

Drifting through the past she could almost see her low-ceilinged bedroom with its lattice windows facing west towards the tranquil beauty of the Downs, and could fancy herself lying there watching the stars come out in the June night sky which never grew wholly dark. How peaceful it had been, how cool and fragrant during the long summer days, how warm and cosy when winter descended on the land and snow covered the fields and woods. She woke from her dream with a little sob and a start that set her heart thumping in the furnace-heat of Fort Amrah.

Meanwhile Kirkland on his way to the hospital to inspect a doubtful case of small-pox went into the club for a drink and found there a telegram from Lahore which filled him with the liveliest dismay.

He sent word back that he would not be home to dinner, then after seeing the sick corporal whose illness proved to be something far less serious than small-pox, went to the club and wrote a long letter which apparently gave him a good deal of trouble for he tore up several attempts and it was nearly eight o'clock before he put the final draft in an envelope and put it in the post bag.

The next day, riding to the canal camp, he met Desborough half-way along the road, riding in to Fort Amrah.

'Hullo! What's up? Canal bust its banks or what?' he asked. 'You look like a thunder cloud.'

Desborough answered him briefly; he did not like

Kirkland and was not inclined to give him his confidence.

‘Merely one of the usual hitches. Rowe is due back to-night, isn’t he?’

‘Yes. Want him?’

‘Probably. How’s your wife?’

‘About the same. I’m sending her up to Murree.’

‘I’m sure that’s a good thing,’ Desborough said, his frown relaxing for the moment. ‘It’s ghastly here for any woman, let alone a delicate one.’

‘Perhaps so, but she chose to marry me and other women are in even worse places. So long.’

He lifted his hand and rode off, and Desborough went on to Fort Amrah, forgetting both him and Marie a minute later, for the news he had had that morning was disquieting enough to put any one or anything out of his head—neither more nor less than a sudden alteration in the planned direction of this section of the canal, put forward by the Home Government through the Irrigation Department. Evidently these worthy gentlemen at home considered such an alteration as easily made across the sun-scorched countryside as it was upon the papers lying on a draughtsman’s table; but Desborough and Hayward foresaw only too clearly the wearisome delays, and cursed the wasted work of the last few months, and the district left for another year without sufficient water—by far the most serious matter of all. Just now when so much trouble was threatening, it was essential to keep the people as contented as might be, and drought

and its consequent evils—scarcity of food and disease, were forerunners of discontent and general upheaval.

The Deputy-Commissioner, John Rowe, a short, red-headed, red-bearded Saxon with his heart in his work, could do very little, and after he returned from one of his rounds of his district, which had entailed three weeks' camping, he and Desborough had a long talk which served to let off a certain amount of the latter's steam but advanced the canal's cause no whit further.

It was decided then that Desborough should see the Commissioner and deal through him with the Irrigation Department, and finally after a fortnight's maddening delay, Desborough made his decision and announced it to Hayward as the two sat in the oven of the clubhouse after dinner.

'Look here, old man, we're both fed up with this affair,' he said and there was no need for him to be more explicit. 'It's absolutely useless wasting any more time and I've come to the conclusion that it's got to stop. I'm going to leave you in charge and get over to London just as quickly as I can. Once there I can get at people and I shall have a chance to make them act sensibly for once. I shall try and do it in a couple of weeks and that will mean I shall be back here in September with luck. Now d'you think you can manage things while I'm away?'

Hayward leaned back in his rickety basket chair and nodded.

‘Yes. I’m glad you’ve decided to go. It’s the only thing to do.’

‘Good man. Well, I’m off as soon as I can get things fixed. I wired yesterday to Darwin and he ought to send permission to-morrow at latest. Hullo—talk of the devil—his answer’s come.’

The club khansamah approached with a telegram and Desborough tore it open, glanced through the message and handed it across to his assistant.

‘That’s all right. Darwin has some common sense. I shall take a couple of days to fix things up and leave here Thursday. Now let’s go round to Kirkland’s, I want to inquire how Marie is.’

Talking of the work to be done, they strolled round in the hot darkness to the Kirklands’ bungalow, for Marie after all had not gone to Murree, but had instead taken altogether to her bed in a sharp bout of fever that had left her too shaken and frail to travel for the immediate present.

They found her up and lying on a cane lounge in her drawing-room looking so pale that both men were shocked, and Desborough unpleasantly startled at the transparency of her face in which the luminous grey eyes were far too big. He sat down beside her and began to talk, hiding his dismay as best he could, and into Marie’s face crept a lovely flush of pleasure as she gave herself up to the joy of his society.

‘I wonder which of us will leave Fort Amrah first,’ he remarked presently. ‘You’ll be fit to travel in a day or two now, won’t you?’

‘ Yes. But—where are you going ? ’ Marie asked
‘ I didn’t know you were leaving.’

The thought was a knife in her heart but weak and ill as she was, she had a fine courage and plenty of wit, and the tone in which she asked the question betrayed nothing of the sudden sick dismay that his words had caused her.

‘ I’m going over to London,’ he said. ‘ There’s a tangle about the works and it seems useless to attempt the straightening process here. Also, as the matter’s a serious one I thought it best to cut the thing and go straight to headquarters. Ah, Kirkland—good evening.’

‘ Hullo Desborough. Evening, Hayward. What’s this about headquarters ? Scandal ? ’

‘ Nothing half so interesting. I was telling your wife about my plans. I’m going home to stir things up over there——’

‘ Optimist ! ’ Hayward ejaculated and Kirkland stared while Marie laughed.

‘ Things are amiss over the canal work and it seems a waste of time trying to get anything put right over here. It’s just a flying visit. I don’t expect to stay more than three weeks in England.’

Kirkland nodded, pushed a tobacco-tin across the little table to Desborough and was silent a minute or two, packing a pipe with meticulous care ; then, with an air of finality he looked up and spoke.

‘ Would you be very kind and escort Marie if I sent her ? ’ he said.

‘ Marie ? ’

‘ Keith ! What d’you mean ? ’

There was amazement in Desborough’s tone, a quivering incredulous excitement in Marie’s ; only Hayward remained silent, watching the Scot’s face with lazy blue eyes.

Kirkland nodded and rose to his feet as if better to explain his words.

‘ I want you to go home for a few months, Marie,’ he said. ‘ You need more of a change than Murree and this is the opportunity to take. I’ve been thinking of it for quite a while.’

Desborough meanwhile had transferred his attention to Marie.

‘ Do you want to go ? ’ he said. ‘ I’m off Friday you know, Kirkland, and it may be too much of a rush. If not you know how very glad I would be to be of any use.’

‘ I want to go almost more than I want anything in the world,’ Marie said in a stifled voice. ‘ But it’s as much a surprise to me as to you.’

‘ No need to tell you before,’ her husband said. ‘ You’d have merely worried yourself for nothing. As it is you’ll have no time.’

‘ You can be ready ? ’ Desborough asked, and Kirkland answered for her.

‘ Of course she can be ready. I wired for her passage and that’s fixed all right.’

Marie said no more. The news had overwhelmed her and in her weak state she was trembling with

nervous excitement, not unmixed with a deeper emotion which she did not care to analyze at the thought of the nearly four weeks in the company of the man who had come to mean the whole world to her. After a brief while she bade the three men good night and went to her room where she lay staring into the hot darkness and picturing the respite that lay ahead.

Desborough, meanwhile, quite ignorant of the truth, rode back to the canal camp with Hayward, forgetful of everything but the reason for which he was going to England, five minutes after he had left the Kirklands' bungalow.

Chapter V

THE P. and O. liner after plunging her way through the Indian Ocean arrived at Aden and entered a calm and red-hot world ; Marie, never a good sailor, had hardly once been visible, but when the boat entered the Red Sea she sent word to Desborough that she was very much better and hoped to be on deck in a day or two.

There were several people on board known to Desborough and at Aden there joined the boat no other than a young acquaintance, Donald Cartwright, on leave from that unenviable spot and in the highest spirits. Gay, and good to look at his high spirits were infectious. Even Marie, fragile as she was, with all her soul wrapped up in another man, nevertheless caught a reflection of his high spirits and being bullied by him to come on deck, lay in a long chair under the awning and smiled at his nonsense which even the heat of the Red Sea could not entirely quench.

They arrived at Suez in the afternoon and all three went ashore, returning late in the evening laden with Donald's purchases ; and since the night was beautiful they did not immediately go below but sat on deck

watching the lights ashore and talking of their plans.

‘I’m going straight to town,’ Donald said. ‘Mother will expect me to dance round for a few days, then I mean to get some shooting if I can, and go down to Wroxholme in October.’

‘Wroxholme?’ Marie echoed. ‘Why, I live quite near. Are you Lady Cartwright’s son from Wroxholme Hall?’

‘That is my claim to distinction,’ Donald said. ‘I hope it doesn’t offend you.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous! I’m interested because my home is near Wroxholme, too. Applegate. It is a farm about half a mile from the Hall gates.’

‘I know it. A thin long house with roses all over it and a steep tiled roof. Ripping spot. May I come and see you?’

‘Of course you may. Lady Cartwright knows my mother, but naturally they’re not intimate.’

‘Why “naturally”?’

‘Because your mother is a very fashionable woman with many social duties and my mother is the wife of a farmer with much work to do.’

‘That sounds doubtful,’ Donald remarked. ‘I don’t think my mother is a snob.’

Marie showed her returning health and spirits by being distinctly impatient.

‘You are really rather stupid!’ she exclaimed. ‘I’m not inferring snobbishness or suggesting my mother scrubs floors and drops her aitches. But how could two such women have much in common? They

meet occasionally and Lady Cartwright is always charming. However, come to see me. Then perhaps you'll understand what I mean.'

Donald grunted unbelievably: he had fallen under the spell of Marie's charm and could not in the least understand what she meant, so Desborough came to the rescue cutting short the conversation by suggesting that Marie should go to bed as she was tired with her long day.

She assented with a little smile at him and he gathered her things together, nodded to Donald and slipped his hand in her arm.

'I don't want to be an interfering old woman,' he said. 'But it's after eleven, Marie, and I must not let you arrive in England looking like a little ghost. How d'you feel to-night? Really better?'

She bent her head in assent as they paced slowly along the deck, her starved heart aglow with gratitude for his unfailing care for her.

'Really better,' she repeated, 'my mind feels rested, Jim, and that means more perhaps than you can quite understand. I can sleep without dreams and worries, and I've nothing to dread.'

'Nothing to dread?' he took her up sharply. 'What d'you mean?'

She flushed at her slip, glad that the shadow of the bridge kept the moonlight from her face.

'Oh, nothing, nothing. Just the tiresomeness of things—and the difficulty of—of life I meant. You know housekeeping at Fort Amrah is not too easy

and—and I've been ill. Keith is so strong. He doesn't quite understand perhaps how very stupid nerves and headaches make you feel, and then I get worried when things don't go right for him.'

Desborough nodded, drawing her a little closer to his side as they walked along.

'It's a rotten life for a woman, that country,' he said. 'And you are not the type to rough it. Can't your husband get a move?'

'I don't think he wants to at present. You see we are not very well off and moving of any kind is an expensive proceeding. This illness of mine has been a strain on him.'

'Yes, I suppose so. But what's the dread, Marie? Neither ill health nor the difficulties of Frontier life explain that—unless you fear the native population. And I don't imagine that is so.'

Marie made no immediate reply for the simple reason that she did not know what to say. It was impossible to explain that her dread lay not in any of the things he had suggested but in her husband's personality. Kirkland's conspicuous bad temper and his power of twisting her words into meanings other than she intended them to bear, had worn out both spirit and courage, and now in her state of low vitality she had grown to dread his brutality of outlook. The knowledge his profession demanded had coarsened him as it does coarsen a certain type and he was clever enough to know the weapon that was most effective when he was out of temper. She shrank under his suggestions

—none too veiled—that the expense of keeping her prevented him from making the success of his profession that he desired, while his frankly expressed opinions on marriage and the sex question generally made her sick at heart with a world that seemed to her poisoned by the desires of the flesh.

Not till she met Desborough did her unbalanced view of life begin to readjust itself; his unfailing courtesy and thought for her, his hard work and healthy outlook helped her to realize that she was morbid in respect to the matter of sex.

At first she had feared too lest his obvious pleasure in her society should prove but a cloak for insult—to such a state had Kirkland's materialism reduced her, but even she was forced to alter her opinions, and now she clung to the thought of Desborough's integrity as she clung to his friendship, regarding him as her anchor and safeguard. She knew now that she loved him and the thought brought distress and anxiety—even a certain mental shame that she—a married woman—should be absorbed in a man other than her husband. Yet the typical suffering that such a situation is apt to produce, was not hers, for Kirkland had killed passion in her, and her love, ardent and tender though it was, demanded no physical possession save in so far that such possession might mean constant companionship. She ached for his presence, longed to be caressed as a child does, cared for, protected—but she felt no desire, needed no more than his confidence and his tenderness.

How was it possible then to give him the answer he waited for. How explain to him the things that even to herself were incoherent and inexplicable. Yet an answer he meant to have, and as they reached the bows he drew her to a standstill where the moonlight flooded the deck with white radiance.

‘Marie,’ he said, wholly unconscious that he was making things infinitely harder for her than they were already, ‘a woman like yourself doesn’t use the word “dread” for nothing.’

He had loosened his grip of her arm and stood half facing her, the pallor of her face and the look in her eyes tugging at his heart-strings. Because he had suffered himself he was considerate of the suffering of others, and this girl was so young and helpless that he forgot prudence in the desire to comfort her.

‘My dear,’ he said gently, ‘can’t I help?’

Th tone nearly broke her down; turning sharply away she clenched her hands on the rail beside her fighting the wild desire to break down and tell him the whole truth yet deplorably conscious that it must not be. For a minute or two Desborough watched her careless of his own rising emotion, heedless of the danger such a situation held for any man whose blood was not water. Then half under his breath he spoke again.

‘Marie,’ he said, ‘Marie——’

At the sound of his voice she turned to him, flinging out her hands to him and the moonlight on her face showed it wet with tears; the next instant she was in his arms and his lips were on hers.

For a moment he held her, passion surging through brain and body, then, as suddenly, he let her go and drew back against the taffrail, shaking all over.

Marie spoke at last after a silence that seemed eternal to them both.

‘Oh—oh,’ she stammered, staring at him. ‘What do you mean—what——’

A footstep close by and the figure of the first officer approaching saved him an answer he did not know how to make, and with a woman’s quick wit in any emotional emergency Marie turned her head and called softly :

‘Mr. Stuart, are you coming to enjoy this heavenly night?’

Desborough heard the new ring in her voice and wondered at her self-possession even as he hated himself for what he had done ; but he was immensely relieved at Stuart’s appearance and walked back with him as he chatted to Marie. At the head of the main companion-way they all paused and Stuart glanced at his watch reading it clearly enough in the moonlight.

‘By Jove, a quarter to twelve ! I must be off. Good night, Mrs. Kirkland. Good night, Desborough.’

‘I’m coming below,’ Desborough said hastily. ‘Oughtn’t you to go to bed, Marie?’

He spoke in a hurried tone, avoiding her eyes and after a second she answered him quite lightly.

‘Yes, I certainly ought—and I will. Good night, both of you.’

She waved her hand and ran down the steps, whereat

Desborough felt an immense relief which did not detract from the shame that had seized him. Declining the offer of a drink he went below dreading lest he should meet Marie on the way to his cabin, intending to go to bed. But he had hardly entered the cabin which he had to himself before he realized the utter impossibility of sleep and betook himself once more on deck.

There in the white moonlight, freed from human companionship, he paced up and down watching the churning water as it sluiced in a great white wave from the ship's bow or scanning the dimness away to the south where feeble twinkling marked here and there the lighthouses of the northern African coast.

The rush of the wind which the ship's swift travel created, the wash of the sea along her sides, the wide spaces of the night all combined to torment rather than to soothe him. Shame such as he had never known took him for herself ; loathing of that moment's domination of the flesh stung with almost intolerable pain.

If he had loved Marie, so he told himself over and over again, if he had even cared a little, his kiss would have been less despicable, but as it was there was no shadow of an excuse. He had permitted the first breach of his defences in taking her arm as they walked, thinking, fool that he was, that he had no need to fear the insidious danger of contact. Well—he had been taught his lesson.

Cursing himself he came to a standstill at last where the stream of the wind beat against his face and tried to think what he should do.

That it was Marie whom he had so treated, was to him, the worst thing of all, for he had always known she had trusted him and he had not only betrayed that trust but had made her momentarily betray herself in the kiss she had given him, the response of lips and heart. He made no excuse for himself, could see none, although he was a man of strong passions and for nineteen years had lived the life of a celibate ; he had betrayed a trust and hurt a woman singularly helpless, and his pride was humbled to the very dust.

Other thoughts began to clamour in his mind, trying to force themselves upon him, reawakening memories that wrung brain and heart, bringing before his flinching soul the pictures of a past long dead, fiercely smothered by hard work ; memories that at all costs he had learned to keep at bay.

When at last he went below it was to toss miserably, tormented by brain and body alike and to find no sleep till the dawn was breaking and the boat steaming into the Grand Harbour at Malta.

Chapter VI

ALL through breakfast Desborough dreaded Marie's appearance, but he had finished his and gone on deck before she came out of her cabin, and it was nearly an hour later before he saw her come towards her chair which he had himself arranged as usual.

She was rather pale, he saw that at once, but her eyes were shining and there was a look about her he had never seen before—a look of youth and happiness that stung him anew for he knew what had brought it there ; going straight up to her he spoke :

‘ Good morning,’ he said and met her eyes steadily. ‘ Will you walk round with me ? I want to say something to you.’

He saw her flinch at his tone but there was nothing for it ; without a word she fell into step by his side and they started their usual morning tramp, finding at last a deserted corner near the foremost great red-throated funnel. Then, with no further beating about the bush he spoke.

‘ Marie,’ he said, ‘ God knows I didn't mean to behave as I did last night. I am bitterly ashamed,

and I beg your pardon. I forgot everything for a moment except the fact that we were man and woman and alone—I've no excuse. My behaviour was doubly insulting between friends such as we are. Will you forgive me? I shall not offend again.'

It was done. There was no mistaking his meaning any more than the sincerity of his humiliation. Marie felt as though a cold hand were holding her by the nape of the neck, crushing life and heart out of brain and body alike. Mechanically she put out her hand behind her, clutching a brass rail and leaning against it, and, as mechanically, she spoke, forcing her eyes to meet his.

'Why—of course,' she said and was surprised to hear how normal her voice was, 'I understand—it was as much my fault as yours. I am not a woman who cries easily and—and you were sorry for me. Let us forget all about it.'

She hardly knew what she was saying but she saw the relief dawn in his eyes and knew her brief dream ended; this man whom she loved so deeply never had, never would, love her. Desperately she sought for words and spoke half at random.

'How long are we to stay here? Is it possible to go on shore? I've always wanted to see Valletta.'

'Three or four hours—oh, yes. Shall I go and make arrangements? I'll come back in a few minutes and tell you.'

He hurried off and meeting Donald Cartwright set that young man's heart at rest by sending him to

join Marie, and in twenty minutes they were in a dhaiso being rowed to the landing-stage.

Thanks to Donald's ridiculous spirits the little excursion was not too painful, and about two o'clock they were back on deck watching the new passengers who were joining the ship come on board. Leaning over they commented on manners and faces, enlivened by Donald's nonsense till even Marie felt herself able to laugh, and gradually up from the north-west a thunder-storm banked up, ribbons of lightning playing from cloud to cloud and causing the wildest haste and confusion amidst the hurrying crowd of people.

Desborough had suggested to Marie that they should leave the ship at Plymouth and Marie who had looked forward to every moment of the voyage and ached to continue it, assented readily enough and he congratulated himself on the fact that Marie had taken things so well, hated himself for that evening, and clumsily enough had asked her pardon; since then she had ceased to occupy his thoughts save in the old way of friendship, for with the end of the voyage in sight, other matters claimed his attention, chief of these being his work. Yet even Marie—hating herself too and despising her weakness in loving another man than her husband and especially when that other man did not want her—could not complain of any want of care. If possible he was even more solicitous for her comfort than before and despite her unhappiness she grew stronger in the fresh Northern air after years of Fort Amrah's sun.

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The journey to London was comfortable, they could not talk as there were other people present, and Desborough left Marie at her hotel and went to his club. He had come to England on a forced journey connected with a tiresome matter, but even so London was London and after nearly four years of Fort Amrah, was sufficiently absorbing. He rose early and went round to see Marie finding her in the vestibule of the hotel waiting for him, and they arranged that she should leave town by the eleven o'clock express.

'I shall do my best to see you off,' he said as they stood together in the lounge. 'But it depends on my appointments as you know. Do you think you can manage?'

'Of course I can, I'm quite strong again now, Jim. And—I shall see you sometime or other at Applegate, I hope?'

She tried to make her tone casual but her courage was ebbing and she longed desperately for one word from him that would assure her of a meeting before he went back to India; but he was already wondering if any message from the India Office had reached his club, and after a moment he rose.

'I must be off, Marie,' he said, 'and I shall try to be at the station. Yes, I expect I shall be down at Lady Gaunt's, at Thorswood to-morrow, but I'm not quite sure. If I do of course we must meet. Let me know how you are, won't you? Good bye and God bless you.'

He took both her hands in a close grip, kissed them,

smiled and turning on his heel walked out into the sunlit street leaving Marie to stand where he had left her, the hands he had kissed pressed against her mouth, her tragic eyes staring at the door through which he had gone.

He did not come to the station ; she had not expected him to, and all through the long sunny hours of the journey she sat in a corner of the third-class carriage facing her life as best she could, wondering why she had been foolish enough to want to come to England when so soon he would be back at Fort Amrah, and then in the same breath going over the voyage once more and living again those precious moments of companionship.

She left the main line at a busy junction, waited half an hour during which she got a cup of tea, and started on the last stage of her journey from Fort Amrah in a slow train that jogged away from all towns into the heart of the country and timed to reach the nearest station to her home two hours later.

At Wroxholme station she saw a brown governess-cart drawn by a brown cob, and her father standing by the cob's head looking anxiously for her.

Robert Morland had handed on one trait very markedly to his eldest daughter—his gentleness ; and as they drove homeward Marie felt something of her unhappiness fade as she gazed at his brown-bearded kindly face. He was so strong, so tender, so altogether able to help, this beloved father of hers, that she sank

into the knowledge and rested there as she would presently sink into his arms.

They reached the house just after seven, and, Marie's heart began to beat painfully fast at the first sight of it; the long straight front clothed in close-growing roses, with the white palings and strip of pebbled path between it and the narrow road, the tall groups of chimneys, the high hedge that shut in the garden and the view across the meadows and the river to the high land just beyond.

They passed the front of the house turning at the gates just beyond into the cobbled stable-yard with its central mulberry-tree overhanging the horses' drinking trough, the stables on the right, the end of the house—the dairy to the left and opposite the narrow grass slope and the bank of the little fast-flowing stream that she had so loved as a child. She saw it all with a pang of joy that was half pain; then from beyond the corner of the house came a hurrying form and her mother's arms were round her, while behind, Joan her little sister danced and shrieked with excitement.

Feeling as though she were in a dream Marie went along the path above the stream past the open door into the dark oak-beamed kitchen with its low ceiling, its window facing the west from where she had so often watched the sunset, its gleams of copper and brass, on to the door that led into the little hall and knew herself at home at last.

She was too utterly weary to do justice to the farmhouse tea, the brown eggs, home-made butter and jam

and crisp bread and thin slices of home-fed ham, and Mrs. Morland secretly dismayed at her daughter's frail appearance promised herself later some searching inquiries with regard to her son-in-law's habits.

An hour or so later Marie lay in bed in the room of her childhood, watching the after-glow in the west as it faded in the light of a full moon rising like a honey-coloured globe in the east, almost too weary to sleep, listening to the slow tick of the landing clock and breathing deeply of the sweet cool air, while one thought grew more and more insistent. She could and would nerve herself to go back to Fort Amrah, because so long as Desborough was there she could bear it ; but when his work took him away then she herself could endure it no longer ; and whether he was there or not she knew she could never again live with Kirkland as his wife.

Chapter VII

THREE days after Desborough's arrival in England Lady Gaunt was seated in the shade of a mighty beech, some embroidery in her lap, a red setter panting on the grass beside her ; two telegrams recently delivered lay on the table beside her chair and she was waiting for the arrival of her niece for whom she had sent. Tall and of good figure, well gowned and in her fiftieth year still a young and attractive woman, Enid Gaunt had not abdicated her throne : she was a hostess much sought after, an adored wife and mother, possessed of good health and a good brain. She should have had no cause for complaint, yet the lines of worry showed in her face and in the anxious expression of her eyes ; the worry that was beginning to undermine even her excellent constitution—an anxiety hidden from her family and seldom admitted openly even to herself save when some extraneous circumstance such as this roused it.

Nadia Desborough summoned from her reverie of idleness in the orchard came across the gardens wondering a little at the summons, saw her aunt and, coming

across to her, dropped into a low chair and lifted delicate brows.

‘ You sent for me ? ’ she said. ‘ I am so sorry to have kept you waiting. ’

Lady Gaunt handed one telegram to her.

‘ Jim arrives to-night, ’ she said. ‘ I thought you would be pleased to have such news quickly. ’

‘ Jim ! To-night ? Aunt Enid, how exciting ! ’

The faint colour deepened in Nadia’s face, her eyes lit up and the rather indifferent air that was characteristic and threatened at times to spoil her, vanished.

‘ What train ? Could I meet him ? Oh—no—I don’t think I wish to. Dear Jim ! It is seven years, Aunt Enid ! A whole seven years ! I can hardly believe we shall meet to-night ! ’

‘ You are not glad his guardianship comes to an end so soon ? ’ Lady Gaunt inquired, looking a little curiously at her niece. ‘ Yet few girls would wish to be wards till their twenty-sixth birthday ? ’

Nadia passed her fingers across her forehead, strong slender fingers as typical of the girl’s fine breeding as anything about her.

‘ It has been so different with me, ’ she said after a moment. ‘ There has been nothing irksome in my relationship with Jim—perhaps our meetings have been too infrequent—yet I think not. I even believe that closer companionship would have brought us both even greater pleasure. I feel strongly the bond of understanding between us. And yet we have seen so

little of each other. Then there is my home with you. It is so happy. It has always been so happy. I have been very fortunate so far in my life. My lines certainly have lain in pleasant places—sometimes I think more pleasant even—forgive me—than yours, yet you have all any woman could desire.’

She broke off amazed at herself. She had not intended to utter such words, they had seemed to utter themselves, and now, dismayed a little, she watched Lady Gaunt and saw, after the first start of surprise, a look she had little expected, a look of suffering suddenly made manifest beneath the habitual serenity of her face. In that moment she knew her vague suspicions justified, and taking her courage in both hands she spoke boldly.

‘Aunt Enid, there is something that troubles you. I have guessed it for long enough. It is something always present and it has grown worse these last few years. It is something you do not share with Uncle Francis for I have seen you summon that mask you wear for the world, when he comes unexpectedly upon you. If I am impertinent and intrusive forgive me, but if you can honour me with your confidence I beg you to do so, for I feel that, in some strange way, a crisis threatens you.’

All through the girl’s speech Lady Gaunt had gazed at her, the colour leaving her face. Now, at its termination she spoke, her voice sharp.

‘Nadia! You dismay me. Have I betrayed myself so?’

There was such anxiety in her voice that Nadia hastened to allay it.

‘No, no! It was never betrayed. It was only my passion for observation coupled to my—my love for you—’ her voice dropped with unwonted shyness at such violation of her customary reserve. ‘Aunt Enid! Give me your confidence. At least speech may be a relief.’

Lady Gaunt stretched out her hand and laid it for a moment over her niece’s, in a clasp that answered Nadia’s words very satisfactorily, but for a moment or two she did not speak and her gaze went past the girl as if to things infinitely remote. Impulsively Nadia broke the lengthy silence.

‘Aunt Enid, you look as though you were gazing into a past that still overshadows you. Cannot I do anything to help you forget?’

Lady Gaunt did not start this time, but her eyes left that distant glimpse of grey wall and narrow mullioned window and came to her niece’s face. Despite the heat she shivered a little.

‘Your intuition is uncanny, Nadia,’ she said. ‘I shall not attempt to deny its truth. Yes, I will tell you—as far as I can. When your uncle and I were in India we spent a certain amount of time travelling as you have sometimes heard me say. Your uncle was—and is—enormously interested in the country and he always loved the northern races. During one summer we made plans to go to Kashmir and we were to pay a visit during that time to his Highness the Rajah of

Gulkor, Prince Gulab Singh who had a summer residence not far from Srinagar in a most lovely part of the country. He was a great friend of your uncle's, a man of extraordinary brilliance of intellect and much force of character. He had been of immense value to the Imperial Government during the time when Germany was endeavouring to undermine the loyalty of some of the Border Tribes. You have not met him I think, but he is often in England and when the Maharanee was alive, they lived a great deal in Paris. But I must not forget to mention the Prince's secretary and devoted friend, a queer little man called Gukar Ali, a native of Ladak, who never left him. He invited us and, just after our arrival at the palace, some most valuable information came to the Maharajah's knowledge. The papers were shown to your uncle, then placed in a private cabinet. The day after this most valuable information came to His Highness's knowledge a very unexpected arrival at Srinagar Hotel gave us great pleasure—no one other than Jim, who had just completed some important task in Bengal and hearing we had gone to Kashmir had rushed up north to snatch a few days' holiday before leaving India.

'The Maharajah, hearing of this, insisted on his becoming a guest with us, and we had a most delightful week. On the last day of our stay the Prince had arranged a water picnic and a very wonderful affair it was, and in visiting one of the temples on the lake shore we came across a strange little man who was, so we were told, a marvellous fortune-teller, and for

amusement it was suggested that after luncheon he should come to tell us our future. So the fortune-teller appeared and really he was uncanny in his powers. After telling me many things of my past life he turned his attention to Jim, and talked the most odd jargon. His words as nearly as I can remember them were these :

“ On the third day from now death shall draw near. On the fifth day a secret shall be disturbed and before many suns have risen service shall be changed and fifteen years shall pass. When East and West meet Death shall draw near once more and once more shall he strike, and not till the shadow of his presence fall across the very face of Life shall truth stand clear in the way.”

‘ Now comes the sequel. Jim stayed on after we left for a couple of days shooting but the Prince was indisposed through a bout of neuralgia to which he was subject, and Gukar Ali was deputed to act as host on a stag-hunting expedition. Starting before dawn they climbed many thousand feet till they reached the summit of a mountain ; but they had no luck and saw no stags. They camped that night.

‘ On the way down the next day a sudden thunder-storm caught them and Gukar Ali hastening down a rocky slope to the river to lead Jim to shelter, slipped and fell from a rock into the river itself which was not only icy cold coming as it did straight from the snows, but also torrentially swift and very deep. Jim however went straight in after him and succeeded after a

dreadful struggle in getting him to land. You may imagine how Gukar Ali felt when he was restored to consciousness, and how deeply the Prince's feelings were moved, for I have told you how attached he was to Gukar Ali. He lodged Jim in his own apartments, insisted on his own physician attending him in case he had suffered any injury and treated him as he would have treated his own son. Jim, however, was none the worse for his adventure and prepared to leave the next day for India, going to Bombay, whence he was to sail for England. Two weeks after his departure disaster fell. Your uncle returning to Simla from his sojourn near Gulmarg went himself to call on the Prince and was to take the precious documents with him; and then, and only then, did the Prince discover that the papers containing the secret information only known to your uncle and himself were gone from his secret cabinet which was in the wall of the room in which Jim had been lodged—and the Prince had shown Jim the working of the spring that revealed this cabinet because it was old and peculiar and Jim was interested in old cabinets. There was no reason why he should not, for Jim could know nothing of the papers which were there. The only other person who had been admitted save when servants and the physician were there was Gukar Ali and he had gone on some errand for the Prince into Thibet. You may imagine the position. No—don't interrupt me for a moment. I have nearly finished. Of course your uncle did not believe for one moment that Jim knew anything of

the matter. To him the very idea was absurd, and the Prince behaved with marvellous self-control and courtesy, declaring that the papers must be found, that some ignorant servant must have tampered unwittingly with the spring, found the documents and been afraid to confess. Gukar Ali might have aided perhaps, but he fell ill of a fever from the chill of his immersion in the river, and afterwards we heard that the physicians said there had been some shock to the brain, possibly a blow on a hidden rock, for when he recovered his memory had completely gone. Prince Gulab Singh pensioned him, but we heard later that one day he was missing and it is thought that he wandered away from his house and was either killed by robbers or by a wild animal for he was never heard of again. This year is the fifteenth year of which the old fortune-teller spoke. Jim arrives to-night and this morning your uncle received a letter from Prince Gulab Singh. He is in London and wishes to visit us by motor on Sunday. There is my story, Nadia, and the cause of my fears. I have mentioned it once or twice to your uncle, but he laughs at my fears for him, and I dread not only for him, but for Jim. Now comes this extraordinary coincidence of visits capping all my months of increasing anxiety and I am much distressed.'

Silence fell as Lady Gaunt ended her story : Nadia was too deeply interested to comment without due thought and the whole matter was so different to anything she had expected that she hardly knew what she thought of it. She herself who knew the country of

which Lady Gaunt had been speaking—had she not spent an unforgettable two months Easter holiday in Kashmir?—found it difficult to recall herself to her surroundings and she passed her hand over her eyes as if she would brush away the vision that had held her.

‘Do you fear that the Prince will try to do Jim an injury?’ she asked, and Lady Gaunt hastened to reassure her.

‘No, oh no! He is still a devoted friend of your uncle’s and of course never permitted himself to appear even to suspect Jim. But I fear the old fortune-teller’s prophecy. The sword of Death—it struck so quickly before when Jim risked his life to save Gukar Ali. And of course there is a certain discomfort in the Prince and Jim meeting again, though it will show His Highness how utterly we always believed in Jim—to us of course the very thought of connecting him with the loss was laughable. But these Orientals, even the most charming of them, are strange beings. I think the West can never understand them.’

‘I think I am rather looking forward to meeting His Highness. By the way wasn’t he given a K.C.S.I. a year or two ago?’

‘Yes. He found much money and many troops in the war. What do you think of my story, Nadia?’

‘I think it extraordinary,’ Nadia said. ‘And I understand your anxiety. Yet after all why should the old soothsayer be able to predict evil or cause

danger to approach Jim? The river accident is easily accounted for. There is nothing uncommon in such a happening. I think, dear Aunt Enid, that you've brooded over this to such an extent that you've got morbid. Frankly I do not believe there is any cause for worry other than the Prince's behaviour when he meets Jim, and if you are fairly certain of that—why the whole thing is not worthy to trouble you so greatly.'

Lady Gaunt uttered a little sigh and leant back in her chair.

'You comfort me, Nadia. I hope you are right. I pray you may be. Now, dear, I have yielded to an impulse and given you my confidence and I need not ask you to respect it. All I do ask is that you never mention it to me unless I request you to.'

Nadia promised willingly enough; her aunt was so obviously disturbed by the whole matter that she had no wish to refer again to the queer story she had just heard, but preferred to think it over by herself.

A maid coming out of the house announced callers and Lady Gaunt went indoors leaving Nadia to spring up from her chair and glance round in search of cover; people had a way of coming out into the garden and she had no wish to be caught.

Thorswood Court, built in the sixteenth century and modernized by a famous architect, had been bought by Sir Francis Gaunt just before he retired, chiefly as a home for his growing family. It was a long two-storeyed house built of brick, its straight windows

painted white, its walls well clothed in flowering creepers and tiny-leaved ivy. The house faced east and south over level stretches of turf, splashed here and there with a blaze of colour from herbaceous borders, the lawns on the east stretching away to a row of tall elms and feathery beeches which sheltered the house somewhat from the winds. On the north only a few oaks and chestnuts stood between the garden and a sunny hawthorn-studded paddock, on one side of which ran a shallow stream to a mill half a mile away; and beyond the paddock the fields rose gently, studded here and there with beech copses or deserted chalk pits till they merged into the short sweet open turf of the South Downs lifting their great clean curves against the sky.

The back of the house was a series of ancient roofs at all levels and angles, the moss-grown tiles faded to a lovely warmth of colour, the stables and buildings half hidden by a grove of oak trees—while on the west, approached through a door in the high brick wall that divided it from the south lawn was a large fruit and vegetable garden. The place was not big yet it was roomy, beautifully situated and possessed a very great sense of atmosphere—the atmosphere of age and mellow dignity which is the chief characteristic of so many English manors. Nadia, surveying the scene this hot afternoon, came to the conclusion that a retreat by way of the fruit garden was the safest, and forthwith she picked up her book and the sunshade Lady Gaunt had left behind, walked delicately as Agag across the lawn before the very windows, and opening the creaky door

slipped into the fruit garden just as voices becoming audible proclaimed the advent of approaching visitors.

There, out of all shade of the beech, chestnut and walnut that made a cool greenness of the lawns, Nadia frowned in a blaze of sunshine and stood considering. At her feet three paths ran different ways and the one before her stretched away across the whole garden between tiny box hedges and espaliers, apple and pear trees paved with narrow moss-grown bricks polished with age. That path led nowhere but to the garden's further edge and Nadia turned to the right, made her way through another door that led through the northern wall behind which were the greenhouses and various outhouses, and finally came out through a little swing gate into the meadow. Away to the east across a stretch of sunburned grass, a fringe of hawthorn, alder, stumpy willow and wild cherry proclaimed the presence of water, and thither Nadia was bound, for she had just bethought herself of a certain spot, shaded from the sun, cooled by any wandering little breeze from the Downs and made sweet by the rippling music of the brook.

It was scorchingly hot across the turf but she ignored it and hurried, then selecting her spot pushed through the bushes and found herself in a leafy tunnel with the brook at her feet and a miniature lawn of finest turf carpeting the bank.

The roots of an ancient thorn-tree made a comfortable back to a seat on the grass, and Nadia sank down with a sigh of relief and gave herself up to the luxury

of idleness. To her left the stream curved, to the right it rippled over the gravel bed beneath the over-arching branches of the trees, in the cool green light that was here and there broken by bars of gold where the sun's rays struck through the foliage and danced on the water ; while opposite she could catch glimpses of a wheatfield ripe for the harvest. Where the corn was thinned by the bank of the stream, a belt of scarlet poppies made a splash of colour so vivid as to give the impression of a painted scene, and here and there the blue-mauve of wild scabious mingled with the wheat-ears.

Nadia, who loved colour and the scenes and sights of the countryside, leaned back and drank in the beauty around her wondering why she ever went to London in the summer and wishing she had brought her sketching things with her. A lark started up from the corn pouring forth its flood of melody, and a water-rat deceived by her complete stillness plunged into the water close by and swam leisurely across the stream, just as a tiny breeze wandering from the great green Downs set the leaves a-quiver and softly rustled the corn. The movement, and the sudden alteration of light and shadow, stirred a vague memory in Nadia's mind and striving to grasp it she lost the drowsiness that was creeping in upon her. What was that elusive memory, where—why, of course ! A picnic in the Adirondacks when she and her cousin, Elizabeth Gaunt, had been visiting friends of Lady Gaunt's in the States. They had been seated by a stream and a breeze had suddenly

ruffled the water and set all the leaves dancing : and she had bewailed to her companion that movement and sound could never be transferred to canvas.

He had interested her more than most men, that powerfully built lithe young man with his pale olive skin, stern mouth and brooding dark eyes. His beautiful English with its faint untraceable foreign accent, his French manners and that air of aloof indifference that characterized much of his intercourse with the world around him—all interested Nadia who had met many and varied types of masculinity and had never met any quite like Léon Dare.

This young man had appeared in New York as a guest of Mrs. John Morris, sister of the Duchess of St. Germain, was introduced and became a rather prominent and exceedingly popular member of New York society. Wealthy, exceedingly good-looking, rather more than intelligent, he was welcomed everywhere, and with the younger set his popularity knew no bounds for he was a superb dancer and treated the youngest débutante with the same charming courtesy as the most important dowager. Mrs. John Morris was besieged by questions. Who was he ? Was he English ? He spoke English so well and seemed to spend a good deal of time there. Who were his people ? Why hadn't she brought him over before ? To all of which inquiries Mrs. John Morris gave smiling non-committal answers. She had known his mother—yes. Yes, he was partly French. Yes, sufficiently well off but by no means rich. More than that she either could not or would not tell and

Manhattan clamoured. It also invited Mr. Dare and gave him a very good time even though he was by no means rich, for had not Mrs. John Morris vouched for him? And she did not fling the mantle of her protection over the ineligible.

He had paid court to so many that his name could be connected with none—till the last three weeks, when he had been seen very persistently in the company of Nadia Desborough who was staying with the Duchess.

Nadia became suddenly aware of the hardness of the trunk against which she was leaning and moved a trifle impatiently: she wished Mr. Dare's personality had not obtruded itself into her thoughts this afternoon. In some curious way he disturbed her and she hated being disturbed when she wished to be quiet. To put him out of her mind she turned her thoughts to Desborough and the disturbing influence passed away, for Desborough was in himself sufficient to absorb all her attention. It was seven years since she had seen him, and recalling the memory of that last meeting she smiled and then frowned, so perplexing had it been then and so curiously unreasonable did it appear now. At eighteen she had been an unformed girl, lovely in a childish way, overflowing with the mere joy of life, yet always a little less uncontrolled than her contemporaries, always holding something of her innermost self in reserve. And Desborough had arrived from Egypt on the night of her coming-out dance. She remembered so well her excitement and delight when a maid came to her room just as she was dressing sum-

moning her to her aunt's boudoir. She had expected the summons, it was necessary that Lady Gaunt should make a final inspection of the new white and silver frock and the first formal dressing of the golden-brown hair ; but the maid went on to say that Mr. Desborough had arrived and would Miss Nadia go at once, and she had hastened on eager feet to greet the friend of her childhood and her guardian, knocking with impatience at her aunt's door and entering tempestuously.

She smiled to herself as she remembered her welcome, how she had gone up to Desborough and kissed him as she had kissed him in her childhood ; he had tightened his arms about her till she could scarcely breathe and then had released her almost roughly. And all his brief visit had developed on those lines. Confidence succeeded by reserve, caress followed by a withdrawal of intimacy, so marked as to anger her, interest having seeming indifference hard on its heels, and no kiss when he went away.

She could afford to smile now ; his coldness would no longer distress her for she did not expect either kisses or confidence, but she was curious to see how the change in her own personality and appearance affected him, and she intended to define the lines of their mutual relations herself.

Distant voices and the staccato bark of a dog roused her from her thoughts ; moving cautiously for the tree-roots hurt, she peered through the branches and saw two of her cousins coming along the northern hedge of the cornfield, and by an indignant shouting and the

agitation of the wheatears in a waving line, it was evident that Sylvia accompanied them. If so, good bye to meditation or its twin sister, sleep; and five minutes later the three arrived on the bank just opposite, Gerald aged fourteen and Elizabeth six years his senior—and Sylvia, who promptly plunged into the water, paddled across the brook and climbing out on the bank proceeded to shake herself vigorously over Nadia by way of expressing her delight at the meeting.

Elizabeth remained on the far side of the stream, but Gerald kicked off a pair of sandshoes and followed Sylvia's example.

'We've been up to Kingley Vale,' he began, eagerness in tone and face. 'And this summer, Nadia, we've simply *got* to get up to the barrows and dig. We might find—oh—anything. Father says they've never been explored at all. But it *is* a tramp, isn't it, Elizabeth?'

Elizabeth had seated herself as comfortably as she could on the grass and at Gerald's words took off her hat and threw it beside her.

'It was awful! I shall never be cool again! And my shoe has rubbed a blister on my heel. When you want to start your explorations, Gerry, I hope you'll choose cooler weather.'

'Bathe your foot,' Nadia suggested, and Elizabeth acting on the suggestion proceeded to take off her white shoes and stockings and paddle across, her short white skirt tucked up under her white silk sweater. As she sat with her slim legs dabbling in the cool water,

Nadia informed her of the approaching visit of Prince Gulab Singh, and Gerald who was pulling Sylvia's silky black ears grunted out his disgust.

'How rotten, and we shall have to behave just so and not talk about niggers or—or—what's he coming for?'

'Just a visit to Uncle Francis. And since niggers are not a general subject of conversation, Gerry, I don't think you need worry yourself. Anyway we've got to put up with it—oh, and Mr. Desborough is coming too—to-night.'

'How thrilling!' Elizabeth exclaimed. 'Aren't you most tremendously excited, Nadia? Don't you wonder what he'll be like and how pleased he'll be to see you? I think guardians must be most intriguing—and anyway he is a fascinating person, I think—oh, really it's too odd altogether! I quite forgot to tell you I had a letter from Hazel Van Dessart this morning.'

'Did you?' Nadia said rather absently, thinking of Gulab Singh. 'Is she having a good time?'

Elizabeth's laugh brought back her wandering thoughts and she met her cousin's great dark eyes and smiled. 'I am sorry. What of Hazel's letter?'

'She gave me news of a friend of ours, or rather of yours—Mr. Dare. It seems he left their place—Silvermere—after he had been there about a week and went back to New York. Nobody seems to have seen him since.'

Nadia, aware of her cousin's scrutiny, continued

stroking Sylvia's head, though at the mention of Mr. Dare her nerves had given a little unbidden jump, and Sylvia, rolling over on her back, lifted amber eyes full of love to her favourite mistress—the entire family claimed her ownership—as only a black spaniel can.

‘Boofuls-dog!’ Gerald exclaimed suddenly stooping to bury his face in her black coat, and Nadia in the general confused weight of boy and dog avoided a direct comment on Elizabeth's news, only remarking casually.

‘He was a most unaccountable young man. Don't you think it's nearly tea-time?’

At the word ‘tea’ Sylvia leapt up, uttered a piercing bark and began prancing round in an agony of impatience till she had succeeded in shepherding her human belongings beyond the seduction of the stream and well on the way home. Then, as they reached the gate she made a bee-line for the kitchen premises intent on her own shameless habit of coaxing milk from cook before receiving tea and scraps of cake in the drawing-room.

They were all three entering by the back way, and in the welcome shade of the oak grove Nadia took off her hat and announced that schoolroom tea attracted her.

‘There are people calling—I have an idea it's those irritating Miss Hammonds by the voices,’ she explained, ‘Gerry, be an angel and scout for me!’

Gerald, who prided himself on scouting, promptly departed, leaving the two girls to wait in the shade

facing the dairy-windows and the moss-grown tangle of roofs at all angles and levels that made the back of the house a picture to delight an artist.

‘Last year I climbed up to my room that way,’ Elizabeth said, indicating the long slope over the dairy.

‘I wonder if I could now?’

‘You’d ruin your clothes,’ was Nadia’s reply.

‘What made you try it?’

‘Donald Cartwright bet me I couldn’t. It was awkward just at the top.’

She relapsed into silence measuring the distance with her eye; the first bit was easy enough, for just at the side of the dairy a great cemented tank for holding the rain-water jutted out, and the ivy that was rooted about its base hid a great stone that several years before Gerald had secreted as a stepping-off place on his ‘overland’ journeys; from there to the lower part of the slope was easy, and the slope itself, so Elizabeth assured Nadia, was easy too. At its summit another roof came at right angles some three feet higher and from thence over the peak of the gable the way, though invisible from the ground, was merely a variation of the same thing.

‘No one would think you capable of climbing,’ Nadia said amusedly, glancing at her cousin. ‘Why do you do these odd things?’

‘Some queer little streak of boyishness in me, I suppose,’ Elizabeth said leaning against the tree trunk. ‘And then too these odds and ends of information sometimes come in usefully. I have all sorts and scraps

of queer knowledge tucked away at the back of my mind. Some day I may find it was the most useful of all knowledge. One never knows. You know, Nadia, we have led just the ordinary conventional life of our position. Perhaps it's rather more interesting than most, but still it's the same, and yet sometimes I feel that one day we may be swept right out of the normal into situations beyond our control and happenings beyond our understanding. I'm explaining badly and it must sound simply idiotic and yet it's true. There is something inside me, perhaps it's my subconscious self, that seems to warn me of something that may happen—some day. As if the abnormal, the supernatural even—I don't know—lurked nearer to our lives than to most and would one day show itself. D'you understand at all what I mean ? '

At the beginning of her cousin's speech, Nadia had been playing idly enough with the scarlet poppies on the wide and flexible brim of her garden-hat, but as Elizabeth proceeded her fingers gradually ceased their movements and became almost rigidly still : when the last words were uttered, she had to be very sure before she spoke that her voice betrayed nothing of the shock Elizabeth had given her.

' Why, yes : I think so,' she said speaking slowly to gain time. ' It does not sound in the least idiotic to me. I am apt to believe rather strongly in the things that many people scoff at—and I think that curious presentiment of yours is not a thing for disbelief or ridicule. Have you discussed it with the others ? '

‘ No. Basil would laugh and so would Eve. I am not sure about Hugh—’ Hugh was her fiancé. ‘ You won’t mention it, will you ? ’

‘ Of course not. What a quaint place we’ve chosen for a discussion ! ’

They both laughed and the appearance round a corner of the house of a maid with some tea-towels which she proceeded to hang on the fig-tree that grew almost opposite the kitchen windows formed a welcome diversion ; she had recently had her father—who lived in the village—very ill, and Nadia went across to ask after him, and when she returned Gerald was sliding down the dairy roof from some hidden aerial path.

‘ They’ve gone ! ’ he said. ‘ But guess who’s come ! A day early, too ! Jim—Jim Desborough. And it’s nearly five.’

‘ Then I must go at once. I can’t come to the school-room. Thank you. Gerry, you’re most useful. Jim here already ! ’

Despite herself she felt her colour deepen and her nerves quiver as she ran up to her room. Desborough had been too powerful a figure all her life for her to meet him unexpectedly with entire calmness. Elizabeth had the adjoining room to her own with a communicating door and as she changed her white skirt and blouse for a frock she hoped her cousin would not appear. Elizabeth, however, feeling the call of hunger to be stronger than that of sociability had gone to join her younger sisters and brother for schoolroom tea and Nadia was left alone to perform a hasty, but very careful

toilet. Her colour had faded leaving her very pale however, and her final survey in the long swinging mirror sent her to her dressing table for rouge. Then, just as the grandfather clock on the landing outside her room struck five, she closed the door behind her and went down to the drawing-room.

There were voices within and as she entered she saw her guardian standing by a further window talking to her aunt who was just pouring out the tea. One moment she paused and back into her mind flocked a dozen memories of the past which she had forgotten ; then at the sound of the opening door he turned, met her eyes and stood as still as she, and through her whole body ran a curious tremor that quivered, then tightened her nerves and set her pulses beating—and it was Lady Gaunt who relieved that strange tension by speech.

‘ Oh, Nadia ! I have been sending everywhere for you ! Here is Jim. Jim—this is Nadia after seven years.’

It seemed to Nadia that the beating in her temples and ears would suffocate her ; yet she found herself advancing and heard herself speak quite normally.

‘ Yes. After seven years ! It is a long time.’ She held out her hand, felt it clasped and gripped painfully in his and saw his steel-grey eyes light up. For a second he neither moved nor answered, then he caught her arm with his other hand, drew her to him with a roughness that left her helpless and kissed her lips.

She was so taken aback that she behaved with the

gaucherie of a schoolgirl, flushing hotly and ready to stammer if he spoke, but Lady Gaunt came to the rescue, saying placidly.

‘Come and have some tea, Nadia. We have been waiting for you. Where is Elizabeth?’

Furious with herself for that ridiculous blush, amazed by Desborough’s greeting and still more by the realization that the effect it had caused was certainly not that of displeasure, Nadia was only too thankful for the interruption. Carefully avoiding his glance she moved over to a chair on the further side of the tea-table.

‘She has gone to the schoolroom for tea,’ she replied, ‘I think Gerald wanted her. They have been up on the Downs all the afternoon.’

‘In this heat? How could they? Did you find the journey down very impossible, Jim. It usually is at this time of year—at least as far as Wrenchester.’

Desborough came across the room and sat down opposite Nadia, watching her with an intent gaze that did not tend to put her at her ease.

‘It was crowded,’ he admitted. ‘But my fellow-passengers knew how to behave themselves, so it was not too bad. I hear you have been down here a week. It’s good after London—and Fort Amrah.’

At the mention of India, Nadia gave herself as it were a mental slap; this blushing confusion was not only idiotic and schoolgirlish; it was vulgar. Lifting her eyes from contemplation of her teacup she looked deliberately across at Desborough and, despite the intensity of the look she met, smiled, and the tension of

her nerves suddenly relaxed even—had she but known it—as his did, as he smiled back.

‘It is green here,’ she said. ‘And there is water—and the sea if you are energetic enough to walk a mile. Fort Amrah should be forgotten till you have to return to it.’

‘You give good advice,’ he said. ‘I shall try to follow it.’

‘By the way, how long have you?’ Lady Gaunt inquired. ‘Here, I mean, for of course you cabled your month’s leave.’

‘With luck a week. Without it—to-morrow and Sunday.’

‘Jim! No longer than that?’

Name and question had passed Nadia’s lips before she knew it and Desborough’s stern expression softened and his eyes smiled across at her.

‘That sounds as if you were really glad to see me,’ he said. ‘Are you?’

Nadia was unprepared for such a direct question, but her former gaucherie had annoyed her too much for her to repeat it, and she gave him as direct an answer.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I am. Did you expect otherwise?’

‘Seven years is a long time,’ he said.

‘I know. I think I mentioned that when I greeted you just now. But I am very loyal to my friends am I not, Aunt Enid?’

Lady Gaunt gave an almost infinitesimal start; for some reason or other known to herself she was paying

very little attention just then to her two companions.

‘What did you say, Nadia? Loyal? Why yes, my dear child, you are very loyal. Is Jim disputing the fact?’

‘Not at all. He is merely commenting upon it with unflattering surprise——’

‘And is agreeably pleased to find it existent,’ Desborough retorted ‘And talking of the virtues I wonder if you would exercise another, Nadia, which I am certain you possess?’

‘I never make a blind promise,’ Nadia answered. ‘Even flattery—which you are employing very tardily—won’t make me do it.’

‘Then I’ll give you facts. Do you know a farm not very far off belonging to a man named Robert Morland?’

‘Farm? Very well. We also know the Morlands, don’t we, Aunt Enid?’

‘They are very nice people,’ Lady Gaunt said in her gentle voice, ‘I can hardly say that Mrs. Morland is a friend of mine, for I do not know her well, but she is a woman I like and respect. What is it, Jim?’

‘Just this. Morland’s eldest daughter, Marie, married the Medical Officer, Kirkland, in my present part of the world, and lives—for her sins—at Fort Amrah. She’s been ill more or less for the last three or four months and finally he decided to send her home. She came over in my charge and I packed her off to Applegate the day after we landed. My lengthy explanation

leads up to this. Would you, Nadia, make her acquaintance, and will you, Enid, be your kindest self and see if you can give her a little pleasure this next month or two? She's not had the easiest of times—Fort Amrah is not the place for a woman of her rather frail health—and I think you will find her a type that appeals to you.'

Lady Gaunt poured him out another cup of tea, sweetening it liberally as he liked, and looked a little anxiously at him as she passed it.

'Is this Doctor Kirkland a friend of yours, Jim?'

'Mister. He's a surgeon. No. He's not a friend except in so far as we are all more or less amiable to each other by reason of propinquity and the scarcity of white company. But she is a rather tragic little figure, and you might put a great deal of happiness into about the only holiday from duty that she's likely to have—as far as I can see.'

Nadia, following her aunt's example, looked at him and a curious little pang shot through her. So he had come home in company with a woman—he wanted her to be given pleasure, to be invited to Thorswood; he hinted, or seemed to hint, that she was none too happily married. Nadia's lips set in a curve her family knew well and her chin went a little higher.

'If she's a friend of yours I will certainly go over and see her,' she said. 'But I suggest that for the first time you come with me. To-morrow directly after lunch might do. What time do you expect every one, Aunt Enid?'

‘By the four-ten. Your uncle is motoring and bringing Eve from the Adairs.’

‘Are you expecting week-end guests then?’ Desborough asked, for the moment ignoring Nadia’s words, and Lady Gaunt began fidgetting with her rings as she answered him.

‘Yes—at least on Sunday we are having some people to lunch and Eve comes to-morrow. Lady Anne Crosbie is driving over one day—she may come on Sunday and—’ for a moment she hesitated, then looked full at Desborough, her pretty dark eyes full of distress.

‘Prince Gulab Singh is lunching here on Sunday,’ she said.

For a moment after her announcement the room was absolutely still, and Nadia, fearful lest she should betray her knowledge carefully refrained from looking up, then Desborough spoke, his tone non-committal.

‘How long has Gulab Singh been in England then?’

‘I have no idea. . . . I mean I’m not sure. About a month I think.’

‘Indeed. What’s his business?’

‘None that I know of. I believe he is here socially. You remember he always liked England.’

Desborough took out his cigarette-case, handed it to the others.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I remember that. . . . Does he know whom he is to meet?’

‘Francis dined with him last night. He was to tell him. Do you mind very much, Jim? I could not help myself.’

At her tone of distress, he turned from his absent contemplation of the garden and looked quickly across at her, a smile breaking up the sternness of his face.

‘Why, my dear, of course I know that!’ he said. ‘Please don’t be disturbed. I shall be rather interested as a matter of fact to meet His Highness again. I have no doubt we have both altered considerably.’

Then, as if to dismiss a subject which obviously troubled his hostess, he turned to Nadia.

‘Why not stroll over to Applegate Farm now?’ he suggested. ‘That is if you’re not tired, or it’s not too hot? I’m longing for a stretch after that journey and Marie is pretty certain to be at home at this hour.’

The Christian name, too! Nadia knew it was unreasonable and unwarrantable to be jealous, and the knowledge horrified her. What right in the world had she to be jealous of Jim?—worse still, what right had she to impute to him love for another man’s wife?

Disturbed and perplexed she went up to her room to put on a pair of walking-shoes, and coming down a minute or two later entered the drawing-room to find Elizabeth there chattering to Jim. He broke off the conversation somewhat abruptly when he saw her however, and with a brief: ‘Are you ready?’ followed her out into the garden.

Their way lay first along a straight stretch of road bordered on either side by grass and hedges tangled with wild rose, flowering bramble, tall pink champions and still taller foxgloves, and to Desborough the homely sights and scents of the countryside, the very fragrance

of the damp grasses in the ditch and the smell of crushed leaves and dust were exquisite after the arid heat and stony wastes of Fort Amrah.

Absorbed in his own thoughts he walked along in complete silence, and Nadia felt herself back in those old days seven years ago when he had behaved exactly as he was behaving now—at one moment almost passionately eager for her society, the next, apparently oblivious of her altogether. She glanced at him once from under the wide flexible brim of her hat—but he was looking straight in front of him, lips set, brows drawn together in a slight frown, nostrils dilated ; it was easy to see that he was thinking deeply and it was equally evident that his thoughts were not pleasant.

After about a quarter of a mile of road they reached a stile half-hidden in nut-bushes, and still in silence entered a wheatfield, where the path was so narrow that Desborough had to drop behind, and not till they were almost at the further side did he come out of his reverie with a little start, aware that Nadia had spoken to him over her shoulder. Then, with a quick apology he came close behind her.

‘ My dear, I beg your pardon ! I really am most exceedingly sorry. Have you been talking to me for long ? ’

The question was so naïve, the tone of apology so sincere that Nadia’s annoyance fled ; arrived at the stile, she seated herself on its broad polished top and looked at him, amusement in her eyes.

‘ Oh, no,’ she said, ‘ I never waste my energies. You have not altered, Jim.’

He came close up to her and taking her two hands drew them up against his breast.

‘ Nadia dear, please forgive me ! Enid’s news of this Maharajah’s arrival sent me over ground I’d hoped to forget. . . . He has unpleasant memories for me. Still that was no excuse. You’ve altered, Nadia, if I have not. You are slimmer and your face—’ he broke off and the smile faded from his eyes, leaving them suddenly darkened as if by the shadow of pain,—‘ your face, too, is thinner, and the lines of your jaw and chin. . . . You . . . are very like your mother.’

He relaxed his grip of her hands and leaned his back against the other end of the stile, and Nadia found herself, as ever, at a loss to guess his next remark. She so seldom heard her mother’s name however that he had awakened a curiosity, always only dormant, to hear and know more about her, and lest he should switch on to some other subject she spoke quickly.

‘ You knew my mother quite well, did you not ? Were you friends after her marriage, or did she go abroad at once ? ’

He did not answer her for a moment or two, and watching him she saw a curious dusky pallor creep up under the tan of his skin, and the flat muscles of his cheek stood out as if he had clenched his jaws. When he spoke his voice was level and colourless.

‘ Yes. I knew her well. We—were friends after her marriage, but she went abroad very soon.’

‘ And you say I am like her ? ’

He turned then, resting his elbows on the stile, and stared at her.

‘ Yes. Very. You have her features and her colouring—and yet you are different. You have a poise and litheness of figure she never had and you have far more self-restraint . . . and as you said . . . you are very loyal.’

‘ You mean—my mother failed in loyalty ? ’

‘ She judged harshly and refused to listen to any explanation. Yes. She failed in loyalty to the man who loved her.’

‘ *Did* my father love her so ? How could he when she had to divorce him ? ’

Silence answered her and it came to her mind how strangely intimate the conversation had become ; leaning a little forward she laid her hand on Desborough’s arm, for he was gazing straight ahead ; he had seemed not to hear her question, but she was determined to have a reply, and repeated her question with a certain impatience.

‘ Did he love her ? Then why ? ’—

Desborough turned his head and met her eyes and the bitterness in his own startled her, but as if he recognized her right to an answer he gave it her.

‘ Yes, he loved her, loved her as deeply and passionately as any woman could desire. You want to know why he gave her reason for divorce ? He did not.’

‘ Did not ? But—’ amazement prevented her from

completing her sentence and Desborough's hand gripped hers with a force that hurt.

'He did not!' he repeated almost violently. 'He was faithful to her—she professed to love him, and at the first trial—at a moment when he needed all her love, all her loyalty, she failed him, refused to see him. He had never told her a lie and she would not even hear what he had to say. She left him and took you with her, left him, to face hell—and if ever a man paid the price of another's guilt he did then—and has done these twenty years. Love! Loyalty! My God! She did not know the meaning of the words!'

The bitter passion of his words left her dumb, and the revelation those words had been, upsetting, as they did, the belief which she had secretly treasured, gave her no desire to answer. With a pallor as great as his and lips set, had she but known it, just as his had been, she stared over the gold-green of the cornfield, her eyes wide and dark with pain, the hand that rested on her lap clenching and unclenching nervously. She dreaded his next words, knowing that she had brought this remorseless truth on herself by her persistent questioning, but when they came they startled her by their very calmness.

'It's nearly a quarter to six. If we intend to call on Marie Kirkland we'd better be getting on.'

She descended from the stile without a word and still in silence they resumed their walk, Nadia too occupied with her own thoughts to wish to talk. Jim Desborough's words had startled her, as much by the reve-

lation they gave her of his own character as by their import ; she realized that she had given him pain and it seemed that he must surely have known both her father and mother very intimately to be able to speak so positively of the tragedy that had ruined her parents' lives. They traversed the field path in silence, crossed the river by the narrow foot-bridge and arrived at Applegate Farm without exchanging a word, then, shaking off the oppression that had come upon him, Desborough spoke.

' I hope you will like Marie Kirkland ; she is a dear little soul.'

Nadia glanced at him ; his face bore just the look of self-repression she knew of old and his tone was entirely free from emotion.

' I hope so,' she said. ' Fort Amrah does not seem the happiest place for a woman.'

The door was opened before he could reply and they were shown into the little old-fashioned parlour with its window at either end, its furniture of excellent and cumbrous mahogany and its general air of mid-Victorian primness. Nadia looked about her curiously ; the room was not unpleasing despite its air of formality and the flowers were beautiful and well chosen ; then a moment later the door opened and Marie Kirkland appeared. She went straight to Desborough, a lovely flush staining the pallor of her face and Nadia watched her a little curiously.

' Marie,' he said. ' I have kept my promise and quickly, too, for I haven't been out of London six hours.

How are you, my dear? May I introduce my ward, Nadia Desborough. Nadia, this is Mrs. Kirkland, a friend of mine.'

Marie held out her hand.

'This is a surprise,' she said and glanced from one to the other. 'I did not know Mr. Desborough had a ward.'

'We see very little of each other, worse luck,' Desborough said, 'this is the first meeting for seven years.'

'You know my cousins, I think,' Nadia said wondering what gave Marie her charm—she was too pale and thin to be pretty—'And your mother knows my aunt, Lady Gaunt.'

A smile lit up Marie's great grey eyes and Nadia felt constrained to smile in return—why she was pretty after all, more, she was almost lovely now.

'Why, of course!' she exclaimed. 'You are Lady Gaunt's niece! How often my little sister has mentioned you all in her letters. I believe one of your younger cousins is a great friend of hers.'

'That would be Penelope I expect. She is ten. Yes. Lady Gaunt is my aunt. But I am forgetting to ask how you are? I heard you have been ill.'

'I have been ill—in India—but the voyage has done me good, hasn't it, Jim? Won't you come out into the garden? It is shady, and this room is so small that it quickly gets stuffy.'

Both her guests acquiescing Marie led the way to a shady place under some lime-trees and there, in answer

to Nadia's questions, began to speak of India in general and Fort Amrah in particular. Several times she referred to Desborough and Nadia felt a new feeling creeping into her heart, a cold slow jealousy of this frail fair girl with the tragic eyes and delicate features—a jealousy that watched Marie closely, noting every glance at Desborough, every reference to his name, resenting the implied intimacy and destroying every chance of the very thing Desborough himself had hoped would come to pass—a mutual liking deepening into friendship.

Following her habit when displeased or hurt she took refuge in an ever-increasing silence, till at length the conversation resolved itself into a series of questions and reminiscences almost entirely confined to the other two, save for an occasional remark on her part to avoid discourtesy.

'Would you like to drive with us to-morrow, Marie?' Desborough said. 'Nadia and I are going over to look at a house I think of taking——'

Nadia's lips grew a little thin; Jim had already spoken of this house to her, but it seemed that she herself was either to be left out or taken for granted and Jim whom she had always looked upon as very much her own private property was apparently at another woman's beck and call. She had never believed herself capable of jealousy; this intense cold anger was new to her and she felt singularly helpless, resenting not so much any physical affection Jim might have for this stranger, but the close mental companionship, his and

her manner to each other seemed to imply. She had pictured Jim working desperately and in his rare hours of leisure enjoying what sport he could obtain, or the society of the few other white men at Fort Amrah. It had never occurred to her that Fort Amrah—remote and desolate as it was—held white women as well as white men, or that when she had imagined Desborough giving all his time and attention to his work or friends of his own sex, he was probably in the company of Marie Kirkland, strengthening an already warm and intimate friendship and being by no means the lonely figure she had pictured.

Marie, on the other hand, as she talked kept glancing at the tall slender figure in white, leaning comfortably back in the canvas chair, and felt rather than saw in Nadia's attitude her growing antagonism. It seemed strange that any one should dislike her ; strange that Nadia seemed to take no interest in the things that made up Desborough's daily life. If she had had the good fortune to call Jim her guardian, how deeply she would have concerned herself with his work and habits ; she supposed they must be cousins, the same surname implied relationship and there was a distinct likeness between them. With the ultra-sensitiveness of illness Marie was hurt rather than displeased, by Nadia's formality ; she would so gladly have formed a friendship with her based on their mutual knowledge of, and interest in, Jim Desborough—for it was unthinkable that his ward should not have both for such a man. Marie could not conceive any other reason than a

certain jealousy of her intimacy with Desborough for Nadia's manner ; had it been that she, Nadia, thought herself socially too far above Robert Morland's daughter for friendship she would hardly have accompanied Desborough on his visit.

Marie, shrewd in her judgment of others, was certain of the correctness of her belief, and was accordingly deeply hurt, for surely it was unnecessary to feel dislike for one so unfortunate in life as herself.

Meanwhile Desborough, entirely oblivious to any undercurrent, was arranging details of the morrow's visit and Marie suddenly realized with a start that she had not heard a single word of his plans.

' Oh, I'm so sorry ! ' she exclaimed, her voice showing her dismay as he spoke to her. ' I didn't hear quite what you said.'

A trifle amused by her obvious inattention, Desborough repeated his suggestions.

' If it suits you we will motor over about eleven—perhaps a little before—pick you up and go straight over to Crossways. It won't take more than twenty minutes or so to get there ; nine miles, isn't it ? Get some lunch on the road and drop you on our way home about half-past three. We shall have to be back at Thorswood fairly early in the afternoon. Will that suit you both ? '

Marie's face flushed with pleasure, her acceptance was immediate, but Nadia made no reply till Desborough put a definite question and then she answered as definitely.

‘ You must leave me out, thank you, Jim. I have something to do for Aunt Enid.’

Marie gave her one quick glance, interpreting the meaning of the refusal quite correctly, but Desborough stared.

‘ Not come ? My dear girl, of course you must come. Any work for Enid can wait. I should not think of going without you. If these arrangements don’t suit, make your own, but please realize that if you will not accompany me I shall not go.’

His tone even more than his words informed Nadia well enough of his determination ; she was a little surprised and despite her by no means pleasant state of mind, could not help being gratified. It was flattering to feel that Jim really needed her, but difficult to ignore the fictitious reasons of her refusal. Like most of her sex she temporized.

‘ I will see what can be done,’ she said. ‘ But please don’t alter your plans especially since they suit Mrs. Kirkland as well as yourself. And I think that we should be going now, for it is after seven and we have some distance to walk.’

Marie rose at once and Desborough vaguely aware by now that in some way the meeting between the two had not been quite what he intended, took Nadia’s arm and drew it close against his side as they walked across the grass to the gate.

‘ Yes. We shall be late I think,’ he said. ‘ Good bye, Marie, till to-morrow.’

They shook hands and left Marie to stand a moment

by the gate and watch them as they crossed the field opposite; and envy for that other girl very little younger than herself filled her. Nadia Desborough's looks, her position in life, her relationship with Desborough, her whole personality seemed ideal to Marie, and the old question—why, why, why—filled her heart, destroying even her happiness in being home again and accentuating her repulsion for the man she had married and the lines where her own life had fallen.

Her mother calling her to supper roused her from her unprofitable thoughts and shaking off her ill-humour with the world she went indoors—at least to-morrow held pleasure, and if Nadia persisted in her refusal, surely Jim would arrange some other outing for her, Marie, and visit Crossways on another occasion.

Chapter VIII

DINNER that night was a family affair, Lady Gaunt, Jim, Nadia and Elizabeth only being present, but the morrow would see the arrival of Eve, who was a year older than Elizabeth, and Sir Francis Gaunt. With the exception of His Highness Prince Gulab Singh and one or two guests invited to meet him for luncheon, the party for the week-end was to be a family one, since the season was over and Lady Gaunt wished for a quiet week or two after a strenuous three months of entertaining for her own two daughters and her niece. Elizabeth had given general pleasure to her family by her engagement to a very eligible young man, Hugh Westringham, First Attaché at the British Embassy in Rome, but Eve who was in her second season had not proved so satisfactory and had shown herself rather a difficult character.

‘Jim,’ Lady Gaunt said when dinner was nearly over, ‘when are you going over to Crossways?’

Desborough glanced across at Nadia.

‘I thought of going to-morrow morning,’ he said. ‘But I am not quite sure yet if that will suit my plans. I’ll tell you later Enid. I hear the place is in a bad condition.’

‘ Shocking ! The house is falling to pieces through want of reasonable care and I don’t think there’s an unbroken gate, a good fence or a sound roof on the whole estate. The tenants would leave if they could find other farms or cottages to go to, and the poverty is great. For pity’s sake, Jim, if you buy it make arrangements to put the place in something like order before you go back to India.’

‘ If Nadia will help me,’ Desborough said ; ‘ I shall need a good deal of assistance.’

Nadia’s eyes met his, read the question in them and softened.

‘ Of course I will,’ she said. ‘ We will discuss your —plans this evening, Jim.’

‘ Shall we have coffee out of doors ? ’ Lady Gaunt inquired as they rose. ‘ Jim, have your port, and then join us outside the drawing-room.’

‘ Thank you, I don’t want any,’ he replied, ‘ so I’ll come now if I may.’

He came round the table as he spoke and slipped his hand inside Nadia’s arm, and instinctively before she realized her action she tightened her arm so that she pressed his hand close against her side. Her response had been so spontaneous that afterwards she wondered at herself, but now all she realized was that Jim was with her and eager for her society. Without speaking she walked beside him and into the quiet garden, her slender white-clad figure very erect, the delicate curve of her chin, uplifted in a way that he knew strangely well, and it was with a pleasure mingled

only too deeply with pain, that he realized how responsive she was to his own emotions.

On the broad flagged path outside the drawing-room windows a footman was arranging chairs, for those left out since the afternoon were drenched with dew, and Lady Gaunt was pouring out the coffee.

‘What a wonderful night!’ she said. ‘I wish Francis were here. Here is a chair, Nadia darling. Jim, will you give Nadia her coffee?’

He obeyed silently, but as he gave the cup into her hand his fingers touched hers and sent an electric thrill through every nerve in her body, and when he drew his chair close beside hers she had much ado not to tremble. This man had power to move her in a way no other man had, and it seemed that she no less moved him, for glancing at him in the half light she saw his face very white and met his eyes fixed on hers with a strange look that stirred the very depths of her heart.

Elizabeth’s voice breaking the silence came as something of a shock.

‘Isn’t a night like this a joy to you, Jim? My recollections of India are pleasant enough, but after Fort Amrah this must be heavenly.’

He moved a trifle restlessly.

‘It is,’ he said briefly, ‘with the knowledge of hell waiting outside the gates.’

‘Jim!’

Elizabeth stared at him in amazement expecting her mother to echo her surprise, but Lady Gaunt only looked at him and spoke very quietly.

'So long as it is outside what matter?' she said, and Desborough, angry with himself for his words, forced a laugh.

'Right as usual, Enid. This is a charming place; did Francis have much difficulty in finding it?'

He leaned forward resting his elbows on his knees as Lady Gaunt began to tell him of their purchase of Thorswood, and he no longer watched Nadia but sat alternately gazing out over the gardens and watching the glow of his cigarette. Although the sun had set nearly an hour the afterglow of rose and gold still lingered in the west while in the zenith the star-strewn velvet of the sky was deeply blue, and after the heat and glare of the day the dusk was wonderful, and Nadia was content to watch and feel, leaving conversation to the others. Before her the gardens lay in purple shadow, mysterious as they could never be by day with leafy fastnesses of branch and twig towering here and there against the tranquil sky. Against the foliage great sheaves of lilies glimmered palely through the dusk, scenting the warm air for yards around, and above the tree tops to the south-east a slowly brightening silver heralded the moon's up-rising. With the going down of the sun the air had grown cooler, freshened by the heavy dew, and exquisite with the fragrance of wet grass and flowers—night-stock, nicotina and the like, that open only with the dusk.¹

Once a night-jar calling its queer raucous notes broke the silence but otherwise all was hushed to stillness under the arch of the far-off heavens.

Nadia began to realize that she was tired, not so much physically as mentally, and she was glad there was no need to talk, for the emotions of the day had exhausted as much as they had perplexed her and she dreaded analyzing them. The slow striking of the clock on the stables proclaimed the hour to be ten, and the last stroke had barely ceased when the servant came out to say Desborough was wanted on the telephone; he went with a grumble and returned frowning.

‘Damned nuisance—I beg everybody’s pardon—but I’m wanted in town to-morrow morning. I shall go up by the 8.50 if you will allow me, Enid; then I can get back directly after luncheon. I’m afraid that disposes pretty effectually of Crossways.’

‘Oh, Jim, how trying!’ There was no mistaking Lady Gaunt’s sympathy. ‘They might have allowed you to have your week-end in peace. I’ll give the order about breakfast and the car right away.’

‘I’ll drive Jim in to the station, Aunt Enid,’ Nadia said, ‘a quarter to eight breakfast, I suppose?’

Desborough glanced at her, and she felt though she could not see that he was pleased.

‘Will you? That’s awfully good of you. Right Enid, a thousand thanks.’

The talk became less desultory after the interruption and about eleven there was a general move towards bed.

‘Just be certain you turn off the lights when you come up, won’t you, Jim?’ Lady Gaunt said as good

nights were being exchanged in the hall. ' Good night, dear. God bless you.'

She kissed him on either cheek and went upstairs followed by Nadia.

There was a sound of footsteps, of opening and closing doors and then silence.

For a moment or two Desborough stood quite still as if listening, then he went slowly out once more through the deserted drawing-room to the garden, lit a pipe and settled himself in a chair leaning his head back and gazing into the scented purple dusk.

It was a wonderful night, warm with a southern warmth yet retaining a sweet freshness all its own, the heavy incense of tobacco-plant and night-stock mingling with the more simple fragrance of dew-drenched turf. Overhead in the velvety blue dusk the stars were already brilliant and in the east the moon hung like a globe of silver just above the trees.

Within Thorswood all was silent on this side of the house though several blinded windows showed squares of light, orange coloured in the dusk ; but without in the shadowy garden the crickets kept up their ceaseless whirring clutter and away in the woods a nightingale uttered his first low thrilling call. Desborough was feeling unaccountably tired and resented the fact as only a man accustomed to superb physical health can ; and because of this weariness of body all the memories that he had striven to keep at bay since his meeting with Nadia rushed in upon him, breaking down the sand ramparts of hard work that he had so

sedulously built for years ; and with a quick intake of his breath that was almost a sob he twisted round in his chair and buried his face on his arms.

A second nightingale somewhere in the garden roused to emulation by its fellow, suddenly began to sing and the man shuddered as he heard, stabbed by the memory of years long dead. The nightingales had sung in the gardens of the palace at Prégatz on the last night of love he was ever to know and he had never heard them since until now.

He conquered the rising tide of emotion after a while and, raising his head, wondered dully at the aching in his throat. He had never wept since that night, twenty years ago this summer when the law had pronounced the final severance between him and the woman he loved ; he had had no tears left. Why then did his throat ache and swell and his eyes burn ? Had he not suffered enough ? Would the past never lose its power to sting and torture with vain regret !

Rising he pushed back the chair so roughly that it fell over, and began pacing up and down the flagged terrace till he had regained command of himself, and presently his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness and he could distinguish the trees by the dense shadow of their great massed curves of foliage lifted against the stars and the still blacker shadows of the bushes nearer at hand. Not a breath of wind was stirring, yet the scent of the flowers that glimmered palely in the dusk floated to him as if borne on imperceptible wings and the very stillness and softness of the night

helped to quiet his strained nerves. Twenty-two years ago he had been in Alania for two years—at first assistant engineer to Sir Edward Rose, later entirely alone, at work on the great bridge that was to span the Danube at Prégatz and thus join Southern Alania to its northern province. Being very young for so important a post, being also a member of one of the oldest families in England and the possessor of a charming personality, Prégatz treated Desborough very kindly and invited him to its most exclusive houses. Especially was he favoured in that he received much kindness from the reigning family. The King, Christian VIII, was a middle-aged and scholarly man devoted to scientific research, and the government of the kingdom was relegated largely to his son, the Crown Prince Louis. The Queen, who was of the House of Bourbon, was older than the King and infirm, but much beloved for her charities and sweetness of disposition, and the Crown Princess, her daughter-in-law, was by no means satisfied to find herself very much in the background of Alanian affections. She was the only daughter of one of the great Roman houses, a spoilt beauty not in the least in love with her grave middle-aged husband, and ennuyée with the duties of her station which were to her both irksome and dull. The advent of the Englishman to whose design the great bridge was being built, was, to her, a godsend. Her father-in-law's interest and her husband's regard for him made meetings easy. She began to believe herself in love with Desborough,

to demand his presence, to find a hundred little excuses for talking with him, and Angela Desborough, young, excitable, undisciplined, resented this monopolization of her husband and showed it with more zeal than discretion. Utterly spoilt by Desborough, who saw in her shallow passion a deep and abiding love, in her excitability the charming high spirits of a child, in her quick jealousy a proof of her devotion, Angela began to tax him with the indiscretion of the Crown Princess and to reproach him for his own behaviour. In vain he told her of his absolute devotion to herself; though with her own eyes she saw the difficulties of his position, she refused to believe either his words or acts. She was obliged to admit that his manner gave the Princess no encouragement, that his behaviour was consistent with his assurances to herself, yet so deeply had jealousy seized upon her that even his loyalty was—in her eyes—against him. With the increasing suspicion of her type, she saw only deception in his integrity, only discretion in his tender care of herself. Ready to find evil where no evil existed, she was aided by a member of the Crown Prince's own household who, himself a would-be lover of his master's wife, was quick enough to see her weakness for the Englishman and to fan Angela's jealousy. The Crown Princess, bored with her life and herself, found her love altering from pretence to reality. Angela Desborough, regardless of her husband's conduct or appeals, showed her resentment by reckless discourtesy—a course of action which spurred the other woman to

fury. Thus the scene for the tragedy was set and the cue given in an occurrence out of all proportion to its result. The bridge was nearly finished, the opening ceremony by the King was fixed for the seventh of July, and because the completion of the bridge would be a thing of far-reaching consequences to Europe as well as to the whole country, its first usage was to be surrounded by festivities. A gala performance was to be given at the Opera followed by a Court ball, and the Desboroughs were not only invited to both as personal guests of His Majesty, but were bidden to stay at the Castle for the previous night and the night of the great day itself.

At the opera Angela Desborough and her husband were in the King's Box opposite to that of the Crown Prince; and, during the interval of *La Tosca*, the King sent Desborough to pay his respects to the heir to the throne, keeping Angela by his side, for her beauty was a joy to the gentle elderly man who had shown her much kindness. King Christian found her unusually silent, however, little guessing the fury of jealousy raging in her heart, and not till he had expressed concern lest she should not be in her customary health did she rouse herself to respond suitably to his remarks.

Desborough, acutely anxious for his work's sake and the test to which it would be put on the morrow, disturbed by the Crown Princess's manner, and suffering from his wife's reproaches and the violent scenes she constantly made, returned to the Royal box in no enviable frame of mind. While preserving out-

ward decencies, Angela skilfully avoided speaking to him and the evening passed in misery for both. Thanking all his gods that he would soon be free to leave Alania, Desborough dressed for the ball scheming—for one thing—a private hour with his wife to attempt the impossible and assure her anew of his loyalty and love in thought, word and deed.

It did not come. Angela had left her room when he went to it and not once during the brilliant night did he get the opportunity of even speaking to her. The Crown Princess signified her intention of dancing with him and forced to comply with every expression of pleasure, he knew how bitterly Angela would wrest such compliance to her own suspicions. Despite the modesty of his generous ardent nature which held loyalty to be the keynote of all honour, and honour the chief duty of man, Desborough was forced at last to see truth in Angela's furious accusations against the Crown Princess; for the latter, not accustomed to refusal, showed him too plainly to be misunderstood what her feelings were towards him. Disturbed beyond measure, Desborough made no response, and the Princess driven by passion to extremities, followed him to his room when all the Palace was asleep.

The rôle of Joseph is never an easy or enviable one. The Princess was beautiful, Desborough was but human; fighting against a temptation in which the flesh alone warred against the spirit and all the spirit meant, he faced her across the width of the quiet room, its very warmth and luxury sapping at his strength,

Piqued by his tacit refusal yet rendered thereby the more ardent, his uninvited guest came slowly across the room till she was standing just before him not two yards distant from the great fourposter bed with its brocade curtains, and the arms and crown of the family whose honour she was about to betray, carved on its panels.

Desperately his hands clenched one over the other as she stood before him ; the faint fragrance of her in his nostrils, the sight of her loveliness, imperfectly concealed by the heavy wrap of fur and silk that she let fall about her with a careless hand, he retreated foot by foot from her till he stood against the wall, his face drawn and keen, his eyes dilated, every limb trembling—and seeing him begin to shake the woman smiled and coming quickly across to him kissed him on the mouth. In that moment, blackness before his eyes, fire in his veins, a sharp sound came to his ears, a voice cried out, and inside the room her back against the door, he saw his wife, and from that moment knew himself lost. No explanations would avail to a woman of Angela's calibre who had driven him from her for the last five months by reason of a jealousy that had had no foundation until this night ; and when, refusing to hear one word or to grant him even one interview, she instituted divorce proceedings he was powerless to help himself and he could do nothing. One word from the Crown Princess would have saved him, but that word was not spoken. Defence meant the betrayal of a royal House to which he owed very much, the ruin

of the honour and happiness of a man who had shown him much kindness, and might even mean the disturbance of his country's diplomatic relations with those of Alania. Tradition, that potent factor so impossible of explanation to the man or the country who has it not by inheritance, bade him hold his tongue, and the knowledge that even the proven truth would not put matters right between himself and Angela, added its powerful weight to the scale. Angela won an undefended case, adultery with person or persons unnamed, desertion easily proved, and with her only child, a little daughter given into her custody, saw the man who had loved her more than himself, go out of her life.

Three years later when he was working at the Key West railway, Desborough heard of her death.

He came back to the present dry-eyed and bitter, having conquered the strange desire to weep that had so nearly mastered him and he stopped his nervous pacing, breathing deeply of the fragrance of the night, wondering at his own emotion. After all it was surely a weak and futile thing to break one's heart over a tragedy twenty-three years old, and he was a young man yet, only fifty in years and infinitely less in health and mind and powers. Strange thoughts began to stir in him, wakened perhaps by associations with the friends of his youth. There was no reason why he should waste his life in fidelity to a woman who had thrown him aside; what if he should conquer that habit—for now in his newly-awakened mood of self-

criticism he told himself it was merely that—and live as his fellow-men lived? He possessed superb health—he was attractive to women, he had wealth and more than his share of good looks. Why should he not take what he could from the world, what was to be gained by austerity, why should he not go out to seek love? He felt he had been cheated out of life and a dull anger stirred in him. His temperament, ardent and passionate, had nevertheless held him in unfair bondage to the love of his youth and thus he found himself bankrupt. He had no perfect memories to dwell in, no secret knowledge that he had tasted the best and that henceforth no second-best would do, no jewel of love to treasure, no hope that somewhere and somehow an undying flame of mutual tenderness and passion would burn for him again. What he had known had been all false, foundationless—yet he had remained faithful, had wasted the best years of his life in a secret grieving that even now had power for torment, and he was left with nothing. His own faithfulness had betrayed him, and even now he was not sure if it yet would not betray him to the end.

He had missed the best in life and he did not know why. He had grasped at substance and gained shadow. The stable clock chimed the half hour after midnight but Desborough, tired though he was, felt no inclination to sleep; regardless of the heavy dew, he carried his chair on to the grass, lit a cigarette and determined grimly enough to occupy his thoughts with work and

work only for a final few minutes before going to his room.

He might as well have hoped to turn the tide now creeping in over the sands two miles away and in two minutes time he realized the futility of his endeavours.

Meanwhile Nadia, after an hour's sleep suddenly awoke with that complete instantaneous wakefulness that is so excessively annoying in the small hours. For a moment she thought some noise must have roused her, but all was still—so still that she could hear Elizabeth's steady breathing through the half-open door. The moon was high flooding the room with silver radiance, not a disturbing sound came from house or garden and Nadia felt all the resentment a good sleeper feels when unwarrantably aroused. She sat up, gave her pillows a good shaking, then started at the sound of a man's cough, and instantly springing to a conclusion she slipped out of bed and into a wrap and looked out of the window.

As she had guessed she saw Desborough leaning back in a deck chair just opposite her window. For a moment a queer inexplicable shyness seized her. Then, tiptoeing to the door into Elizabeth's room she pulled it to and returning to the window spoke his name just below her breath.

He started violently and swinging round saw her and rising came across the grass.

'Why are you not asleep?' he said, and it flashed through her mind how worn and set his face looked in the moonlight. 'It's late.'

‘ I know. I have every wish to sleep, but I am wide awake. What about yourself? Are you intending to spend the whole night in the garden? ’

‘ Part of it. ’

‘ I wish I could join you, but Mrs. Grundy forbids ! ’ she said, smiling down at him. ‘ She may even be outraged by my talking to you like this. I am sure every one is asleep. ’

‘ Probably. Is all well? ’

‘ Absolutely . . . Jim—’ her voice took a graver inflection—‘ You look horribly tired. Won’t you go to bed? ’

He stood looking up at her, the cigarette in his fingers, his face raised a little so that the light falling upon it revealed the lines about the mouth and eyes that spoke of some long repression and struggle; and that look touched Nadia’s heart, rousing within it a new protective tenderness to mingle with that other emotion that had seized upon her during these last hours. That tenderness was in her voice as she repeated her words.

‘ Won’t you go to bed now and rest? I shall—we shall—make many demands upon your time and patience to-morrow and you have to go early to town. Please, Jim ! ’

‘ I’ll do anything you want if you ask me like that ! ’ he said, a smile driving away something of his obvious fatigue, ‘ only “ physician cure thyself ” ! ’

‘ I will,’ she said, and lifting her hand in a little gesture of farewell turned away from the window, sought her

bed and in five minutes, contrary to every expectation, was asleep.

Not so Desborough. The thoughts he had for company were none too pleasant, and though he fulfilled his promise and went to his room he lay awake through the long silent hours, watching the stars travel across the arch of the heavens and facing his own past.

At the appointed hour Nadia brought her own little car round to the door and drove Desborough to the station four miles away. It was a beautiful morning with a promise of great heat later in the heavy dew and white haze veiling the distance ; neither of the two spoke of their midnight meeting for Desborough was busy with thoughts of the interviews and work that lay ahead of him and Nadia was strangely content in his presence. As they entered the outskirts of the old town however Desborough, feeling he had been none too polite, roused himself.

‘ What are you doing to-day ? ’ he asked. ‘ I wish I could stay down.’

‘ We shall bathe presently and we may sail after—nothing very energetic. Couldn’t we go to Crossways to-morrow about tea-time, if—Prince Gulab Singh has gone ? ’

‘ After tea we might run over. Why didn’t you want to come to-day when I suggested it ? ’

Nadia’s colour deepened faintly ; for a moment she did not answer. Then, her attention all for her driving, she spoke briefly.

‘ I wanted to go alone with you,’ she said.

He glanced quickly at her, but she was not looking at him or she would have seen what surprise her words had caused him. Then he spoke.

‘You shall,’ he said and though his voice was low, there was a singular intensity about it, ‘I was a fool to suggest Marie coming. I don’t want her. I don’t want anybody but you with me at Crossways.’

Again Nadia felt that odd little leap of her pulses, but this time there was no leisure to examine its meaning; the London express was in and Desborough had to run. Three minutes later it was pulling out of the station and Nadia was on her way home.

Chapter IX

LONDON was stifling. Desborough's business was but partially satisfactory, the chief man he wished to see with regard to the trouble at Fort Amrah was out of town for the week-end, and the strings he wanted to pull therefore remained slack ; another man kept him waiting a quarter of an hour and therefore made him miss a following appointment and there was general difficulty and delay. He was not in the best of humours therefore when just before one o'clock he ran into a friend in Whitehall, Admiral Sir John Walton, who welcomed him with the greatest enthusiasm and demanded to know what brought him to England.

'We can't talk here,' he added before Desborough could reply to any one of his half-dozen questions. 'I'm lunching some friends at the Berkeley at half-past two. Will you join me? We might walk up.'

Desborough accepted the invitation and striking across the Horse Guards Parade they strolled northwards talking, and when they reached the further side of the Green Park and were close to their destina-

tion the Admiral had a pretty clear idea of Desborough's difficulties with his bridge-building.

'I know a fellow who might be useful to you,' he said, 'Fitzgerald, private secretary to Grantham, is a nephew of mine, and though Grantham is officially out of town on a holiday, I happen to know he's up to-day to see a certain Punjaub friend of his, Gulab Singh. You know him?' for Desborough had half checked an exclamation. 'Well—that is the man you want and I'll get Harry to fix it. I don't want to do it myself for just at present Grantham and I have a slight disagreement about some matter and we're not seeing much of each other. He's a peculiar fella. But that's the man. I know where Harry's lunching and I'll telephone through to him—what's that? Trouble? Nonsense, my dear chap, I'm delighted.'

The sight of the Berkeley recalled the luncheon to Desborough's mind and in answer to a question the Admiral drew him a sketch of his guests.

'Westringham—you know him—Embassy, Paris; Mrs. Harold Presscott—funny, isn't it?'—Mrs. Harold Presscott was Lady Gaunt's youngest sister—'one or two others, and most important of all that very charming woman Princess Anne—daughter of King Christian VIII of Alania. She married one of the Stonellis about twelve years ago. My dear Jim, what a damned fool I am. Did you know her?'

Desborough thrust his arm through his companion's, anxious to assuage his self-reproach.

'That's all right. Why in heaven's name should you

worry? I believe I met her once but she was a delicate girl and spent most of her time at Greifhatz Castle or in Sicily. They had a villa there. I shall be interested, to meet her.'

When he came back from washing his hands he found the Admiral talking to Mrs. Presscott, a rather faded but still pretty woman, who greeted him effusively and passed him on to Sir Ronald Westringham, late British Ambassador to the French Republic. He and Desborough had met before in Paris and stood chatting over affairs till two other people joined the little group having met at the door and both being obviously glad to be rid of each other's company—Paul Lumley the most talked of writer of the day and Hugh Westringham, Elizabeth's fiancé.

Then some one entered the vestibule. The Admiral went forward swiftly to meet her, and Desborough stood quite still watching her while all his surroundings sank to oblivion; and it seemed to him as if some ice-cold grip was releasing its hold upon his heart—a grip that had held it for over twenty years.

She came slowly across the vestibule talking to her host, and Desborough knew that she moved superbly; there was a moment's delay while she greeted the other guests, then came his turn and their eyes met.

He knew afterwards that she was true to her race and blood, with the fine clean lines of breeding and the poise and dignity that belonged to her rank; but at the moment he knew nothing but one fact, a fact which shook his soul to its foundations—that he was face

to face with the only woman life held for him, now or for ever.

He kept his self-control and bowed low over her hand, but he was no ascetic and the flame within him blazed in his eyes as he lifted his head, and she felt his fingers ice-cold and trembling beneath hers.

For a space, brief enough in actual time, yet long enough for eternity never to efface its meaning, their eyes met ; then beneath the delicate pallor of her face a wonderful slow colour rose and into her eyes crept a soft yet radiant splendour in which there was neither wonder nor shame nor fear, but only truth.

The Admiral spoke and the little group broke up, Westringham coming to take in Princess Anne, and presently Desborough found himself at table nearly opposite and next to Mrs. Presscott, and the first thing he was conscious of was her thin rather mocking voice saying :

‘ Jim, you seem to have fallen under a spell. I did not imagine you to be that kind of man.’

He felt as if some one had slapped him in the face. Was it possible that others beside his beautiful love had seen or guessed what had happened ? Unbearable as the idea was, it was exactly what he needed to make him pull himself together, and he turned to her with a smile as mocking as her own.

‘ I am always ready to fall under a spell,’ he said, ‘ and in that I fear I am no different to my fellows. We are all ‘ that kind of man ’ when it comes to essentials, my dear Winifred.’

She glanced across the table, then back at him.

'There is a husband,' she remarked, and at the studied meaning of her tone, a spark leapt for an instant into Desborough's eyes, then it was gone again and they once more held their amused mockery.

'Indeed? But how that adds to the drama of the situation! And talking of husbands—is Mervyn—er—in town?'

He was rewarded by seeing her eyes flicker like the eyes of one who starts from a blow, and was immediately sorry he had stooped to such a weapon; Mervyn Presscott was notoriously occupied with other wives than his own. But his shaft went home for she baited him no longer, but led the conversation into entirely safe conventional channels and presently abandoned him altogether, leaving him to the mercies of Lady Walton, soft and plump and white-haired, who began promptly to tell him he looked ill and suggest remedies of rest and 'feeding-up.'

He was making a tremendous effort to behave normally, yet had any one been present who knew him very intimately, they would at once have become aware that he was labouring under some strong emotion, and would most certainly, had they been either Nadia or Marie, have discovered the cause with the minimum of delay; as it was however he could make his voice talk, his lips smile and his eyes avoid looking, in so far as courtesy permitted, in the direction of the Princess. To do more was beyond him; to do less, so great a temptation that after a while he forced his

mind to other things and let his glance rest on the man just to his right—Lumley. What an extraordinary personality. Brilliant of course, one had but to look and listen for five minutes to know that, but objectionable, even a trifle repulsive.

The buzz of conversation went on around him and he took his part through force of habit, but deep down in his soul only one thing remained—Anne of Alania and the love she had awakened within him.

Chapter X

LUNCHEON was over ; every one had behaved exactly as usual, Lady Gaunt had been her most charming self as hostess and his Highness Prince Gulab Singh had not been behind her in his rôle of guest.

Nadia, as luck would have it, had not been present at the first moment of meeting between the Sikh Maharajah and her guardian, but from the apparent cordiality between them all seemed well, and Sir Francis was quite visibly pleased at meeting his old and valued Indian friend once more. Now, after coffee, Lady Gaunt, her daughters and niece, were in a shady place in the gardens while Sir Francis and His Highness had their talk in the former's study ; Desborough was nowhere to be seen. It seemed to Nadia, unobtrusively watching her aunt's face, that Lady Gaunt's anxiety was passing, as surely it must. Prince Gulab Singh had met Desborough with no sign of animosity, life was normal and secure. How could an old soothsayer in Kashmir, long since dead, have had power to foretell danger and death in this sheltered present ?

Eve's voice interrupted her thoughts and she put down the book she was not reading.

'What did you say? I'm so sorry.'

'I suggested a run out to West Wittering. We might get a bathe. It's so stuffy here.'

She moved restlessly and Lady Gaunt interposed in her soft anxious way.

'Eve dear, I would prefer you stayed till the Maharajah leaves. He's sure not to stay long and you can easily bathe then. But he is rather an important guest you know.'

'What has he come for?' inquired Eve, ignoring the subject of departure. 'Has he some political scheme to talk over?'

'I imagine so. They have been nearly an hour in the study. I suppose it is this India Franchise Bill. Where is Jim? Is he with them?'

But no one seemed to know where Desborough was, and for want of anything better to do Elizabeth leaned over and looked at the book Eve was reading. It was bound in a peculiar shade of purple suède, and was remarkable for having no lettering of any sort on the cover, but a strange little device or symbol in dull gold on the back.

At her sister's action Eve looked up.

'*The Cretan Island*,' she said briefly and resumed her reading.

Elizabeth shrugged her shoulders but made no comment and after a few moments Sir Francis and his guest were seen coming across the lawn. Prince

Gulab Singh, K.C.S.I., Maharajah of Gulkor, was, in his sixty-sixth year, a magnificent-looking man. Tall like most of his people, he was broad of shoulder and still lithe of limb. His rolled beard and curled moustache were iron grey but his eyes were clear and bright as ever, his expression vigorous, his whole personality that of a man in the pride of his strength.

His piercing look softened as he sat down near Lady Gaunt, for not only was she the wife of his friend and as such to be treated with honour, but for her herself he had a very deep and real regard. He had travelled widely, spoke several languages with ease and knew his European world as few Indians ever know it; moreover he was a man skilled in reading character and keenly observant. He knew well enough how the thought of the meeting between himself and Desborough had distressed her, and because of that distress he had treated Desborough with a suave politeness, and affected to forget the extraordinary happenings of all those years ago. He had deceived his hostess thereby and was glad of it, knowing her mind to be put at rest, but he had not deceived Desborough himself and he knew it.

Desborough, when they first stood face to face, had seen a glint, infinitesimal, swiftly vanished as lightning, in the dark fierce eyes; and the smooth courteous manner had not imposed upon him. He knew Gulab Singh to be his enemy now as he always had been, and knew too that very soon he would act—and the thought roused in him a new zest for life, a sense of

hazard and adventure that he had thought dead for ever.

Sir Francis, the political discussion over, felt nothing but pleasure in once more meeting a man for whom he entertained the greatest liking and regard, and Lady Gaunt, her fears largely at rest, exerted herself to make the visit a success.

They talked chiefly of India, and Gulkor in particular and the Maharajah sketched out his latest plans for his hostess' benefit, telling her of the hospitals he had instituted in the larger towns, the agricultural college nearly completed at Thelpoor, and his most recent scheme, namely the importation of English fruit trees and the planting of spacious orchards in the district where the Amrah-Gulkor irrigation canal would prove of service.

At the mention of the canal Nadia looked up.

'Is not that the canal that is to pass Fort Amrah?' she asked.

Gulab Singh gave her one quick look, and Nadia had the momentary impression of a sword blade flashed naked before her eyes; then he answered her.

'The canal passes Fort Amrah on its way north to join the Peshawur-Attock canal,' he said. 'Your guardian Mr. Desborough speaks much of it?'

'It is naturally his chief interest,' Nadia replied looking steadily at him. 'It should be of inestimable value.'

Was it her fancy or did a faint ironical smile ⁱⁿ curve

the old man's lips for a second? She was not sure, and if so it was gone in a moment, but she felt a curious discomfort in talking to him that was very rare for her. Elizabeth entered the conversation, if such it could be called, at that moment by asking a question about one of the old semi-authentic legends of Gulkor which she had heard as a child and then forgotten, and the Maharajah lost his formidableness and began to talk to her in a way that showed his pride of race and lands. His Western veneer went too as he became absorbed in his story, and when Desborough came out half an hour later, it was to see an enthralled group listening to Gulab Singh, Penelope and Gerald on the grass at his feet, Elizabeth and Nadia with chairs drawn close, even Eve with intent gaze fixed on the stern ivory-toned face.

The Maharajah was recounting the story that every child in Gulkor is taught in its earliest years, a story much resembling that of the last days of Carthage, and his dark eyes glowed and his voice rang with the pride of one in whose veins ran the heroic blood of that wonderful Princess Karpurla whose noble courage and selfless devotion saved Gulkor from the enemy and made it one of the proudest States in all the northern land.

'Woman-like she made the sacrifice and gained eternal honour from our race—the honour that no temptation can sully, the honour you of this Western world live and die for—the honour that once stained makes life unendurable. Is it not so, Mr. Desborough?'

The sudden change in the pealing voice, the mention of the name, made them all start, for no one had seen Desborough approach who was standing at a little distance. Now at the question he met the look which accompanied it with steady eyes.

‘Your Highness speaks truth. Life without honour is worthless.’

This time Nadia knew she was not mistaken, for that faint but quite perceptible smile, flickered over the old Sikh’s face, and seeing it, despite the heat, her blood ran suddenly cold, and she looked across at Desborough. He too was smiling with his lips, but his gaze was as significant as Gulab Singh’s, and for a second of time, too brief to be noticeable, the two men faced one another ; till with an uncontrollable movement Nadia left her chair and going to Desborough slipped her hand within his arm.

‘Come and sit down, Jim,’ she said, conscious that she must give some reason for her sudden arising, and though her words were for Desborough, her glance was for the Maharajah, and meeting it, defiant, fearless, even threatening, the old man felt a little thrill of the admiration courage always aroused in him, and instinctively his own eyes softened though his purpose was implacable as ever. This girl knew something, perhaps all, and she loved the man—that was evident as the sun in heaven, yet stay—into the old Sikh’s memory flashed a story he had heard but imperfectly many years ago when staying on the Riviera. James Desborough . . . Alania . . . the great bridge at Pré-

gatz and his companion's chatter. He recollected her high voice even now, and her dainty empty young prettiness as she sat beside him in the sunshine at Cannes watching the people on the parade ; even her name came back to him—Mrs. Presscott—how she had chattered, speaking without sense or wisdom, even as the parrots chatter who are but foolish birds. With as much of a start as his Eastern calm ever permitted him, the full memory of that chatter, and the meaning of the girl's eyes flashed into his mind. His daughter ! She was his daughter—and for some reason she did not know it, had never been told the truth.

He continued to take part in the conversation, even answered many questions about Princess Karpurla with which the younger members of the family plied him, but behind his hawk's eyes the scheming Eastern brain was working swiftly, and the long-cherished scheme—of punishment not revenge—for betrayal of his house's sacred hospitality was once more occupying his thoughts. Gulab Singh, descendant of a hundred kings, was no degenerate ; pettiness in any form was unknown to him, and personal revenge for an injury was in no way what he desired with regard to Desborough. His hospitality had been betrayed—that was the act of a man without honour and full of foolishness ; for that a swift punishment had been enforced when the first of the soothsayer's prophecies became true. Gulab Singh had no wish for personal satisfaction ; what he demanded was a far greater thing

which as yet was unattained—the avenging of his honour; and to such a man, highly civilized and cultured though he was, such was a sacred obligation and could but be wiped out in blood.

And Desborough knew. The words of the old sooth-sayer which had so disturbed Lady Gaunt, had long since passed out of his mind, but the injury of which Gulab Singh believed him to have been guilty, remained a vivid thing. He knew enough of the East not to fall into the common error that because vengeance delayed, it would not fall; and he had no quarrel with the Maharajah because of it. He realized what the old man felt and not only understood but agreed. Yet he knew he was mistaken and he had no desire to end his life or his career because of a mistake. Therefore he was grateful for the warning he had received, and put himself upon his guard.

With the desire to learn his enemy's movements if possible, he asked a direct question.

‘Is your Highness returning to India shortly?’

The veil so instantaneously lifted had dropped and the Maharajah was a Western gentleman once more.

‘By the next boat,’ he said. ‘The *Melita* is her name. She sails on Friday. It is time I returned. My people grow restless. I shall see you one day in Gulkor, Mr. Desborough. May that day soon come!’

‘The opening of the canal is fixed for the twentieth of January if I gain my own way here,’ Desborough rejoined. ‘I hope it may be possible for your Highness to be present.’

The old man bowed and again that little flicker of ironical amusement crossed his face.

‘Our hopes unite. I intend that it shall,’ he said. ‘You should invite your ward out to be with you for the occasion. It would be a unique experience for her.’

‘He is thinking of it,’ Nadia said and could feel rather than see the amazement her words caused. ‘I hope to have the pleasure of meeting your Highness in his company when the bridge is completed. Will your Highness excuse me?’

Careless whether he read her meaning or no, she looked straight into the old man’s eyes, smiled a little, bowed very deeply almost sketching a curtsy, and withdrawing from the little group went indoors.

Ten minutes later, when Sir Francis was driving his guest to the station, Desborough went in search and found her in her own little sitting-room standing by the window that faced the Downs. Without any preliminaries he came to the point.

‘Nadia,’ he said, and something in his tone made her wheel quickly round and look at him, ‘what do you know?’

For a moment she did not answer, remembering her promise to Lady Gaunt, then pausing to choose her words, she spoke.

‘A short while ago I surprised Aunt Enid in some distress. She asked me to respect the confidence she gave me. If you will request her to allow me to be frank with you, I can answer your question.’

Then suddenly her formality vanished and she laid her hands beseechingly on his arm.

‘Jim! Let what I said come true. You knew why I said it, but I need your assurance. Let me come out to you before the bridge is formally opened. I must.’

Her evident knowledge of that unhappy incident at the palace on the lake shores, disconcerted Desborough. He did not answer immediately, and seeing his hesitation she renewed her appeal.

‘Jim! Grant me this one favour! I’ve never troubled you with requests have I? And this is very reasonable. If you feel qualms about the respectability of such a performance—well Mrs. Kirkland can chaperone me. But we will leave details. It is the promise I want. Jim, Jim! I beg you to let me come. I implore you!’

Her voice shook with the intensity of her desire; she had not realized before she spoke how deeply she felt on this matter or how the thought of his danger struck at the very root of her being. She knew, as she waited for his answer, how vital a necessity he had become, how strangely she loved him; and quite suddenly, surprising herself as much as him, the tears rushed up in her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

Amazed and touched, he put his arm round her, and as she hid her face against his shoulder, he spoke almost as passionately as she had done.

‘Nadia — Nadia — my darling girl, don’t!—for heaven’s sake don’t! I promise you shall come—I

promise you anything you want—but I can't bear this. Nadia—I——'

He broke off, gritting his teeth together to keep back the storm of words that sought for utterance; the sound of her unsteady breathing, her cheek wet against his, the feeling of her in his arms, was almost more than he could bear.

All his starved fatherhood clamoured for recognition, all his being cried out at the unnaturalness of silence—almost roughly he put her from him and forced himself to speak with some attempt at lightness.

'Nadia, what in the world is the matter with us? You, and tears—I never dreamed such a combination possible! And if you upset yourself so over some fancied danger to me, why, my dear, you'll have me weeping too because you do!'

He handed her his own handkerchief, laughed, and took care to stand back to the light so that she should not see the expression in his eyes; and Nadia who had not shed tears within her memory, was quick to recover herself and laughed too.

'What an idiot! And I think you're rather one too, Jim! I must be entering second childhood I think. Thank you for your handkerchief—it showed great presence of mind to offer it!'

She dried her eyes and gave it back to him smiling at herself, and sat down on the couch by the window.

'Jim, I don't want to be inhospitable but I wish to speak to Aunt Enid . . . you know what about. . . . Shall you be here or in the garden?'

‘ In the garden. But, Nadia, would you mind not asking her just now ? You have answered me fairly effectually and we had thought of going to Crossways. Wouldn’t it be a good idea to stick to our original plan and go ? ’

‘ Why, yes ! I’d actually forgotten Crossways. You shall drive my little Talbot. I will be ready in ten minutes.’

She went off to her bedroom and Desborough on his way downstairs met his sister-in-law who stopped him with an anxious :

‘ Jim, what did you think ? ’

He had no need to ask what about for he guessed at her fears far better than did her husband ; but he had no desire to let her know his real thoughts, so he was careful not to be too casual.

‘ I thought his Highness was very interesting,’ he said, ‘ and I am very sure he bears no malice. Put your troubles out of your head dear Enid. Would he have been so normal with me, do you think, if he had not let the past be forgotten ? ’

Her brows relaxed somewhat at his reassuring tone.

‘ No I suppose not. I hope you are right. But—you know, Jim that was not all. There was the old soothsayer’s prophecy. It is the year—and East and West have met ! ’

‘ As they have done and will do a hundred thousand times. My dear, surely you don’t think an old native in the back of beyond could foretell our future ? ’

He was able to speak now with entire truth, for

the idea seemed too absurd to trouble about, but Lady Gaunt though longing to share his scepticism could not be quite convinced and only shook her head as she went on her way.

A few minutes later the little blue Talbot swung out of the gate and headed for Wroxholme. The evening was very close and the sun was sinking in a reddish haze ; not a leaf stirred and the atmosphere seemed as hot as at mid-day. Nadia prophesied thunder before morning and bewailed lest the summer weather should break.

‘ Though if you are grilling in town you would prefer that it should,’ she said. ‘ Must you go back to town to-morrow ? ’

‘ Yes, worse luck. If Mortimer had only kept his appointment in time yesterday I need not have gone till the evening, but he kept me waiting and so I missed Iverne and the result is—9.50 to-morrow.’

‘ You’ll come down again before you go ? ’

‘ Of course. I shall be down next week-end. Are people coming ? ’

‘ Yes. Rupert St. Auld and the Rochester girl Joan, and the Goring twins Neville and Eileen. It’s to be a young party here you see and Uncle Francis’ friends and Aunt Enid’s in Scotland.’

‘ Are you all going North ? ’

‘ Eve and Elizabeth, and I. Not the children. Elizabeth’s wedding is in October. Oh, Jim, I love these old gates and I have longed so often to go inside them.’

Crossways was a fine old place gone to rack and ruin and they spent an hour prowling about it, Desborough, it must be confessed, rather pre-occupied. Nadia's emotion had taken his thoughts back again to the past and he longed to tell her the truth. Yet if he did, the affection that she gave him so freely now, might lose its spontaneity, might become just a question of duty, or lessened by blame of his conduct.

Then again he thought of the resolve he had taken when he heard the finding of the Courts—that he would cut himself off from everything that pertained to his former life, that nothing of Angela's should remain to claim him. He had not thought then to love his daughter so deeply.

Chapter XI

THE week of glorious summer weather had developed on that Sunday of Gulab Singh's visit to Thorswood into the commencement of a spell of blazing heat without dew or wind ; and on the Downs and over the fields and meadows running to the sea, the air daily danced and was misty with heat. More than once the excessive sultriness of the evenings had given hope of a thunder-shower before morning, but never had that hope been fulfilled, and the harvest began early under a dome of cloudless heaven.

Nadia had consulted her uncle and then, armed with notebook and pencil and her own very clear ideas, had spent the week prowling about Crossways as she herself said, studying the place, and deciding after prolonged and careful scrutiny what was necessary to be done. She had decided not to take any other active steps in the matter till after Desborough's next visit, for this was too serious a matter to be rushed into and unlike most of her sex she was master enough of herself to be able to wait. Desborough had given his own cool capable brain to his daughter as well as his ardent temper, and Nadia made very thorough

preparations for her work before she commenced it.

Saturday, when he was to come down, found Nadia fidgety with impatience to see him and to discuss the affairs of Crossways with him and she was disappointed when a telegram came just after luncheon saying he should not be down till the last train. As she had planned an afternoon at Crossways she found herself at a loose end, and for want of anything better to do went out of doors and found everybody in the gardens watching or playing tennis. Elizabeth, Joyce Capell, one of her girl-friends who was staying in the house, Gerald, who despite his youthful years was an excellent player, and Neville Goring, who had arrived that day, were playing on the further court which was shaded by the elms and oak-trees along the southern edge of the lawn. Eve a little apart was lying back in a long chair reading or pretending to read, a bizarre figure in a white jumper, a skirt broadly striped in purple and yellow, and a huge purple hat; while Basil sitting full in the sun a little distance away acted as umpire for the hotly-disputing players assisted by fifteen year old Esmé Goring, grandson of the late Anthony Goring. The house-party was an essentially youthful one, Lady Gaunt inviting her children's friends to Thorswood and reserving her own and her husband's for Scotland whither she was going in a week or two's time.

Nadia was hailed by Basil but paid no heed to him and sat down in the shade not far from Eve, who, after a few minutes, glanced up and closed her book.

‘ So Jim Desborough is not coming till late ? ’ she remarked, ‘ I suppose you’re sick about it. Are you in love with him ? ’

Nadia’s brows drew together and her tone was ominously quiet.

‘ Do I appear to be ? ’ she inquired after a moment’s silence.

‘ You exhibit most of the symptoms,’ Eve answered carelessly. ‘ I’m not surprised. He’s very charming—only he certainly is not prodigal of his society is he ? ’

Nadia was by no means easily angered, and the tempest that Eve’s tone even more than her words aroused within her, surprised herself ; trained to self-control however, she managed to answer with a certain degree of calmness.

‘ He is a busier man than most of your acquaintances, and I rather fail to see the cause of your question. Jim is my guardian and my dear friend. It would be just as reasonable if I asked if you were in love with George Lumley.’

This retort courteous silenced Eve and for a while nothing more was said, both cousins watching the game.

The set finished the players drifted, chattering, off the Court, Basil and Neville Goring went indoors to fetch drinks and a minute later Basil came out again and went over towards Nadia.

‘ Two more telegrams for you, Nadia,’ he said. ‘ This is like a French farce. What have you been doing ? ’

Nadia took them lifting surprised brows.

‘How very odd! My acquaintances must be seized with a very violent desire to communicate with me. Oh, this is really too bad!’

She had torn open the first envelope, read the words:

‘Deeply regret impossible for me to leave town for Sunday. Love. Jim,’ and stood frowning at the second not in the least desirous of learning its contents.

‘Hard luck,’ Neville said, sympathetic always, but Basil, more practical, took the other telegram and read it aloud.

‘“Landed in England this morning. May I call early next week. Dare. Reply paid.” May I venture to suggest that the boy is waiting in the sun?’

Nadia took the telegram heeding nothing for the moment but her own disappointment; read it through, and in spite of Basil’s remark, hesitated before she spoke. Then she held out her hand.

‘Any one with a pencil? Thank you, Neville. There’s the answer, Basil. Be kind and take it for me to the boy you pity for waiting.’

Basil grinned and read the answer aloud as he had read the message.

‘“If you wish. Nadia Desborough”,’ and in his turn raised his brows.

‘Can’t say you are excessively cordial,’ he said. ‘Even if Desborough has disappointed you, you are rather curt with the other feller—what is his name? Dare.’

‘Why should I be “excessively cordial” ? He is not so great a friend of mine,’ Nadia retorted. ‘Elizabeth knows him as well as I do. If you don’t want to take the telegram, Basil, I will.’

She was thoroughly cross—with Jim, with herself, with the absent Dare. The latter had been so insistent to know her plans and had stated several times that he was coming to England at once ; therefore the six months’ silence broken only now by this telegram was not quite what she had expected and she saw no reason to be particularly flattered by the delay.

Yet all the same she thought a good deal about Dare during the evening, and when she slept that night he entered her dreams—despite her annoyance at his treatment of her his was not the personality that permitted itself to be forgotten.

Chapter XII

THE day which had been hot in the country was in town almost unbearable ; Desborough who had spent the morning seeing various people with regard to his work and had looked forward to the shady quiet of Thorswood for the Sunday was more than annoyed when he found himself compelled to stay over the week-end. It could not be helped however ; for the invitation to luncheon on Sunday came from no less a person than the Secretary of State for India, and too much hung upon the meeting for him to dream of refusing. So it came about that the telegram was sent to Nadia and he himself taking advantage of a free hour or two, made his way to Claridge's with the intention of calling on Princess Anne Stonelli if she were still in town.

He was to dine with Admiral Walton and Fitzgerald, private secretary to Grantham, a man's dinner at the Naval and Military, and he hoped to get something definite settled before he should meet Grantham the following day ; but in the meantime he had a couple of hours to spare and perhaps Princess Anne was in London.

Good fortune favoured him, for just as he entered the hotel a victoria swung very high, and, drawn by two magnificent black horses, was driven under the portico and pulled up before the doors, and Princess Anne herself came across the vestibule on her way to drive.

Desborough caught his breath and stood for a second just watching her; then he moved. She saw him, instantly her expression changed and her face which had been sad and rather weary was lit up by a smile.

He kissed her hand rather more fervently than he knew, and a faint colour mounted to her face.

‘Dare I suggest you were coming to see me?’ she said, and went on without waiting for an answer: ‘If so, perhaps you would be willing to accompany me on my drive? I was going alone but your timely arrival has saved me that depressing necessity.’

‘I shall be more than willing,’ he said rather hoarsely. ‘You know that.’

‘I thought it,’ she said with the least little emphasis on the verb. ‘Let us go at once. My horses dislike standing and we may find some air in the Park.’

He followed her without a word, took his seat beside her and not till they were nearly at Park Lane ventured to look at her; then it was to find her regarding him with a little amused smile.

‘Well, my friend,’ she said, ‘are you always so silent?’

It was his turn to change colour and he felt the dull red burn in his face; but he met her look steadily and before the blaze in his eyes her own fell.

‘No,’ he said. ‘But I cannot talk trivialities to you—and you know it. Of course you were right. You knew I was coming to see you. You must have known it. I have been twice this week but you were out of town. I didn’t dare to hope you would be back—why did you come back? London isn’t the place for Sunday.’

She lowered her sunshade a little so that her face was more in shadow and under the curving brim of her black velvet hat he could see nothing of her expression, but her voice when she spoke held a hint of demureness.

‘London is what one’s friends make it, Mr. Desborough.’

He leant forward trying to see her face.

‘I can hardly dare hope I may be counted as one of them, Princess.’

She made no answer and the two splendid horses had taken the carriage past Hyde Park Corner and half-way towards Kensington before she spoke again.

‘When do you return to India?’ she asked then. ‘Is it soon?’

‘Almost immediately. You know India?’

‘I have never been there but I am deeply interested in the East. Tell me about your work out there. Your bridge carrying the Amrah canal across the Thelpoor river—oh yes, I know of it. Why are you here in London? I want to hear more.’

Her choice of subject was sufficiently surprising and

as for a moment he hesitated to reply, she spoke again.

‘Mr. Desborough, do you know that you are a very modest person?’ she said. ‘It does not seem to have occurred to you that people may be interested in your achievements.’

‘My work isn’t of the kind that usually awakens interest in the public mind,’ he said. ‘It’s too technical and people take it for granted.’

That little flicker of amusement danced again in her eyes as she regarded him.

‘I am not often wrong in judging men,’ she said. ‘And once more I say you are not conceited. Please don’t look at me with such severity. Am I not allowed to admire your work?’

‘Very few people give it a thought outside one’s fellows in the same job.’

‘No? But I happen to take interest in all big achievement—and I have seen your bridge over the Zambesi River. Also there is the bridge across the Danube at Prégatz.’

Desborough could not help showing that her knowledge of his work rather took him aback, and she saw it and laughed a little.

‘You thought no one knew anything about the Zambesi bridge, perhaps, except yourself. You are like the rest of your sex—showing a resemblance to the ostrich. I have not only seen the bridge. I was in the second train that passed over it.’

Moving a little he sat back in the corner of

the carriage where he could more fully see her face.

‘ But how you have travelled ! What made you take an interest in bridge building ? ’

She regarded him steadily and the laughter in her face gave way to a charming gravity.

‘ Because it seems to me to be so essentially a man’s work. Shall we leave the carriage and walk for a little ? It is so cool and shady under the trees.’

He assented only too willingly and leaving the road they struck away across the long slope of the grass, walking slowly towards Kensington, remote from every one as though in the heart of the country. Then, taking up the thread of their conversation she went on talking.

‘ Yes, I have travelled much since my marriage.’

At the last word his ardour received a check and it was with a distinct effort that he inquired after Prince Stonelli.

‘ He is in Japan,’ the Princess answered. ‘ He too loves travel and the East. It is a taste we have in common. But I am going back to Alania very shortly. My father is growing frail and his sight troubles him. I have heard him speak of you.’

Desborough’s mouth hardened.

‘ His Majesty was more than kind to me,’ he said after a moment or two’s silence. ‘ Both he and his Highness the Crown Prince were graciousness itself.’

She nodded a little and turning her eyes away looked over the park as they sat down in the shade of a great beech.

‘My brother is a rather fine man,’ she said meditatively. ‘He has courage, and a heart. If the modern anti-monarchical spirit allows him to come to the throne he will make a good king. My father talks of abdicating but the feeling of the people is against it. Since my mother’s death during the war he has suffered . . . and he is over seventy and too old to support constant grief. It is only the young and the middle-aged who can live on when their hearts are broken. God is more merciful to the old. They are allowed to die.’

He made no reply, there was none to make. He dared not trust his voice but laid his hand over hers and saw the colour come slowly back to her face. She let her fingers lie for a moment in his before she withdrew them, and he saw her beautiful mouth tremble for a second. Then she spoke, still looking over the empty stretches of the park.

‘It is strange, is it not, how much we can bear, we human creatures,’ she said. ‘When we are very young we think it impossible to live if we must suffer, but when we grow older we realize it is impossible to die. . . . We clamour at Heaven’s gates, we cry out that we cannot bear our pain—Heaven is silent . . . and after a while we learn to accept the inevitable in silence. We may be able to do no more, but perhaps that is all God asks of us. After all, there are few finer virtues than courage. . . . But I am moralizing . . . forgive me, I have behaved atrociously. You are not good for me, Mr. Desborough. You are too simpatica

—what a word that is! It expresses so much.'

'There is nothing to forgive,' he said, 'you are only saying what I myself feel . . . but why do you speak as though life held no more for you than suffering? It is not true . . . it *shall* not be true. . . .'

The rising emotion in his voice communicated itself to her, robbing her of something of that armour of delicate pride that had served her so well; half wearily, half curiously she spoke.

'What else can there be?' she said. 'We cannot alter fact.'

'It is not true!' he repeated, 'I will not let you say it. I will not let you believe it to be a fact. I tell you it is not.'

Her answer was hardly above her breath.

'You will not let me,' she said. 'Why do you speak so confidently? Why do you think to change the course of life itself?'

He made some inarticulate sound and leaning forward tried to meet her eyes but she would not look at him. Her fingers tightened on one another and he could see a pulse in her beautiful throat beating furiously and at the sight all his control fled. Laying his hand over hers he tried to steady his voice.

'Because I love you,' he said. 'No—wait—I must tell you . . . I must. I loved you the moment I looked into your eyes that day we met. I know I sound a madman—perhaps you even think my words are an insult. Yet there is the truth and you yourself cannot alter it. I love you . . . I love you!'

His voice broke and he bent his head over her hands ; somewhere near a lark—strange visitor in cities—rose singing from the grass and soared up into the blue, and Anne Stonelli neither moved nor spoke. Only the unaccustomed tears rose very slowly to her eyes and ran unheeded down her cheeks.

Desborough felt her fingers move beneath his at last, move and clasp them closely ; raising his head he looked into her face and his own went very white and his eyes blazed.

‘ Anne ! ’ he said, and rising to his feet he stood in front of her. ‘ Anne . . . speak to me ! ’

She too rose and her eyes met his with a look that no man had ever seen in them before. Very softly and steadily she spoke.

‘ What do you wish me to say ? ’ she said. ‘ Tell me . . . ’

Coming a step nearer he took her hands in his and crushed them up against his breast.

‘ The truth,’ he said. ‘ Just the truth——’

‘ The truth ? ’ she echoed, and the lovely colour crept up into her face, ‘ I have never before told this truth to any man—I have never dared. I love you.’

Chapter XIII

THE daughter of a reigning monarch, even if that monarch be king only of a small country bordering on the much villified Balkan States, cannot visit the capital of any other country without a certain number of people knowing where she is and a certain number also being in attendance on her. Princess Anne was not only a member of a Royal House, she was also quite a well-known figure in European society and a very beautiful and brilliant woman into the bargain.

All her world knew of her movements despite her utmost care, and all her world too knew of her relations with her husband. Prince Carlo Stonelli was an amiable waster, the joy of other spirits like himself and the prey of pretty women who would grant favours for financial aid. He never pretended to any virtues he did not possess, he admired his beautiful wife quite sincerely and possessed enough good feeling not to thrust his unfaithfulness before her notice. It was generally given out that he was delicate and could not stand the winter of Paris, Rome or London, so during those months Princess Anne entertained in her

splendid palace in Rome or in her appartement in the Avenue Henri Martin, and Prince Stonelli wandered gracefully and idly through Egypt, Japan or the South Seas, in company with several servants and one or two chosen companions.

This year he had not returned but had stayed in the East, and his wife had spent the spring and early summer in her beloved Alania for the first time since her marriage some fifteen years ago. Her visit had been marred somewhat at its commencement by the death of the Crown Princess, but there had never been much love lost between the latter and her sister-in-law, and except for the Court mourning and what it entailed Anne was not troubled by the occurrence. She changed her plans however and instead of staying in Paris and then going to the sea for the summer months, came over to England and took a suite of rooms at Claridge's. She had many English friends and in a quiet way she entertained a good deal, one of her chief visitors being Admiral Walton who, as a personal friend and equerry to the King, had known Princess Anne since she was in short frocks. The acquaintance with Desborough had begun at the Admiral's luncheon, but she had wished and intended to meet him long before and the meeting was not nearly so unpremeditated as Desborough himself believed. One thing and one thing only was purely chance or fate—the result of that meeting. Anne had never dreamed she would fall in love with the man she had so assiduously sought out, she had indeed believed herself incapable of falling in

love with any one, and when the truth came home to her she was much disturbed. Yet it was true and she made no attempt to disguise it from herself, and on the Saturday afternoon when she arrived back from her drive she was as excited and agitated as a girl. She had dropped Desborough at the corner of Berkeley Street, and if any of her friends had been awaiting her they could not but have observed the radiance that seemed to emanate from her whole being. She was dining at the French Embassy and would not see Desborough again that night, but Sunday afternoon they had arranged to motor into the country getting back in time for dinner. Madame La Fontaine her only lady-in-waiting was suffering from hay fever and as she often drove long distances unattended the matter had been easy to arrange.

Meanwhile Desborough, the worries of the Amrah canal forgotten, had turned into the Green Park and there striking across the grass he walked rapidly, oblivious of all his surroundings as the realization of what he had done came home to him.

The severance between Anne and her husband had been complete save in name for many years, but the fact of her marriage remained and it seemed an uncanny thing that once more his most intimate affairs should be involved with those of Alania. Ardently, passionately in love as he was he refused for the time being to look into the future, but back of his brain he knew that tragedy was once more hovering over his life and that the honour of a House he had once saved at so

dear a cost was once again in peril—and this time through no other being than himself and his desires.

He reached the further side of the park and turned up Constitution Hill careless as to his destination but feeling the imperative need of movement ; he was not best pleased when some one stopped him with a—

‘Hullo, Desborough ! didn’t know you were in town.’

The speaker was Hugh Westringham, Elizabeth’s fiancé, and Desborough was obliged to stop and speak for a minute or two while Westringham lamented the work which kept him in town over the Sunday.

‘I’ve been dancing attendance on an acquaintance of yours by the way,’ he remarked, ‘Gulab Singh, Maharajah of Gulkor. They deputed me to be a kind of A.D.C. to him ; thank heaven he sailed last evening. Which way are you going ? I’ll walk with you, I’ve nothing to do till seven when I’m meeting a friend at Euston who is going to take pity on me and stay till Monday.’

He hesitated slightly before the word ‘friend,’ but Desborough was too absorbed in his own affairs to notice it, and was by no means grateful for the offer of company. However he could not be churlish to a man he liked as much as Westringham, and together they walked up Constitution Hill, crossed to St. George’s Hospital and stood for a moment just near some scaffolding that was erected by the Hospital’s corner.

‘I suppose I shan’t see you again ?’ the younger

man said. 'You sail towards the end of the week, don't you?'

'Yes. I didn't know you knew Gulab Singh.'

'He was a friend of my father's in the old days. By the way, if you're not doing anything to-night will you dine with me at my rooms? This friend of mine is rather an interesting chap.'

'I'm afraid I can't, dear fellow. I'm fixed up. Thanks all the same.'

'Couldn't you come in late to-morrow then? We shan't be going to bed till the small hours if I know my man. Come along some time about eleven or after.'

He was so obviously disappointed over the dinner that Desborough gave in and they started across the road intending to part on the further side, dodging a sudden stream of traffic.

What happened then was so swift that it was over before Hugh realized what had happened. A bus bore down swiftly upon them, Desborough quickened his step, slipped and fell, almost before he touched the ground had rolled out of the way, the bus wheel missing him by a hair's breadth.

There was a general commotion, a vigorous swearing on Desborough's part, the discovery of a banana-skin by an excited bus-conductress and a hurried escape into the Green Park.

Not till he was alone in his room at the Club did he allow himself to form in words the memory that clamoured for recognition. The memory at which he had laughed when Enid Gaunt's anxiety had made her

speaking of it; and though he would have been willing to laugh now, he did not find it quite so easy, for the coincidence—if such it was—was too strange to cause amusement and he had too narrowly escaped a horrible death. Almost involuntarily he spoke aloud:

“Fifteen years shall pass and East and West shall meet once more. Then shall Death draw near and once more shall He strike. Not till the shadow of his Presence fall across the very face of life shall truth stand clear in the way.”

The sound of the words spoken aloud, restored something of his confidence and with an impatient exclamation he began to dress—but the memory remained, try as he would to shake it off. The thing had been so sudden, so unlikely. It was of course merely a coincidence, but it was an uncomfortable coincidence nevertheless and he wished he had not connected it with his Highness the Maharajah of Gulkor.

He had spent more time than he knew since leaving Anne and now suddenly realizing the hour he had to make all possible speed to get to the Naval and Military Club by eight: he was only a few minutes after time however and Fitzgerald had not arrived. The Admiral was waiting and by way of greeting informed him that Fitzgerald had succeeded in carrying through the proposals he, Desborough, had put forward and that in consequence to-morrow's luncheon with Grantham himself would be merely to confirm the matter. It was a great relief to Desborough and the dinner passed very pleasantly, the three men talking of their work and

the future of imperial matters. As the port was put on the table the talk turned on the morrow's luncheon with Grantham.

'He is in a pretty good temper just now,' Fitzgerald remarked à propos of his chief, 'and he's quite ready to give your plans his official approval, Desborough.'

'What brought him round?' the Admiral inquired. 'He's not usually complacent with regard to anybody's ideas but his own. Somebody got at him?'

'Well, I did what I could,' Fitzgerald said modestly. 'But the chief wangler was a very unexpected person, no less a person than Prince Gulab Singh.'

'What?'

Desborough rapped out the word so sharply that Fitzgerald jumped and the Admiral shot him a quick look from under his heavy brows; whereat he bit his lips vexedly and spoke in his usual manner.

'Gulab Singh? I didn't know he'd had anything to say in the matter. Does he know Grantham well?'

'He knows everybody, and he had a long interview with Grantham two days ago, and afterwards Grantham told me that he intended to over-ride the decision of the Committee. I told my uncle, didn't I, sir? But I didn't guess old Gulkor had had anything to do with it till he mentioned the matter to-day.'

Desborough nodded and relapsed into silence; such news of such intervention was most unwelcome and he was unpleasantly startled by it; the Admiral guessed something was wrong and switched the conversation into another channel, and shortly before eleven Des-

borough made his excuses and departed. The day had been too full and he desired no company but his own in which to think matters over.

On his way home he hesitated whether he should ring up Princess Anne but decided against it, and contented himself with walking twice past Claridge's like any boy, all matters of work and intrigue put for the time being out of his head by the mere thought of her.

He had determined for the few brief days he had left to put all thought of the future as it affected her and himself out of his head, and to enjoy her presence without permitting the hopelessness of their love to spoil the few brief hours Fate allowed them, but he found his resolution hard to carry out when at last he lay staring into the grey dusk of his room, and over and over again came the thought of the parting so near ahead.

He lay awake most of the night but he never gave a thought to Nadia who, till this week, had absorbed them all; even Nadia's personality and all it meant to him, had retreated into the background before the amazing thing that had happened. Of Prince Stonelli too, he thought not at all; every one knew Stonelli's way of life and to him Anne owed nothing in the way of duty or affection. Yet what future was there for either her or himself after all? What could there be? He could not ask her to go away from England with him, and he hated the thought of being her lover in secret even if she loved him enough to wish it. Tossing

and turning he dozed uneasily and woke to the hazy breathless heat of an August Sunday.

He went in the Park after church because he thought there might be a faint hope of seeing Anne, but she was not there and he hated the fashionable and unfashionable crowds, the staring and sauntering, the senseless parade at a foot's pace up and down the same paths.

The luncheon at 10, Belgrave Square, was at a quarter to two and shortly before, just as he was leaving the Park he heard himself hailed by name and wheeling round came face to face with no less a person than Ramsay Burke, wearing the same shapeless tweed suit and battered looking Homburg hat that he had worn at Fort Amrah. If possible he appeared thinner and more zealous than ever, but there was no mistaking the genuineness of his greeting and Desborough greatly to his own surprise felt quite sincerely pleased to see him again.

'Heard you were in London only yesterday,' he said when greetings had been exchanged. 'Friend of mine knows you and told me . . . Hugh Westringham.'

'D'you know Westringham? Desborough said in some surprise, 'I should have thought you two would have been enemies rather than friends.'

'So we are—politically. Diametrically opposed. But he's a nice chap; a very nice chap. And how are you and what's the result of your visit?'

'Good I hope, but nothing is quite settled yet.'

Where did you go after you left Fort Amrah, Mr. Burke ? ’

‘ I stayed at Peshawur. Interesting place. Visited Delhi and came back sailing from Madras. It’s a wonderful country, Mr. Desborough, wonderful. But you know what I feel about things there. It’s all wrong. By the way, it may interest you to hear that I’ve been appointed Sub-editor of *The Signal*. ’

‘ *The Signal* ? Are you in sympathy with its policy then ? ’

‘ To a great extent I am. They go a bit far sometimes, but on the whole I’d rather they did than not. I’m giving them a series of articles that might interest you on a people’s government. ’

‘ Perhaps you’d have them sent out to me ? ’ Desborough suggested. ‘ I’m interested in your views, Mr. Burke, although I don’t agree with them. I hope you’ll tone the paper down a bit though in some of its views. They’re not democratic. They’re anarchical. ’

Burke’s eyes blazed with the fervid light his friend knew so well and his enthusiasm was bursting forth in hot speech when Desborough stopped him.

‘ I’m sorry, but I’ve got to lunch with Lord Grantham in four minutes,’ he said. ‘ Get my bridge settled you know. Look here, lunch with me to-morrow at the Savoy Grill, one thirty, I’d like to have a talk with you. ’

‘ Right-o, I will. Good luck to your lunch. ’

Not the least offended by his summary dismissal

Burke waved a farewell and hurried off, while Desborough, a trifle amused and quite sincerely interested, made his way to Belgrave Square.

He left the house two hours later with the matter settled ; the canal would run as he had planned and the work was to be pushed forward ; the great man had been gracious, even cordial and Desborough's mind was free from a load.

To his bitter disappointment he was late for his appointment with the Princess, and it was four o'clock before he arrived at Claridge's to find her waiting for him in her flower-filled sitting-room.

She came half-way across the room to meet him when he was announced, greeting him as she would greet an old friend, but when the doors were closed she gave him her lips and gazed hungrily into his eyes.

' Oh, my dear,' she said as he held her. ' I have so longed to see you again ! I can hardly believe yesterday to be true. Come over to the light. Let me look at you ! '

She drew him nearer to the window scanning every line of his face as if to imprint it for ever on her memory, her beautiful eyes telling him more than even her gracious words, and Desborough forgot everything but the fact of her presence and its joy.

They decided it was too late to drive ; she gave orders she was not at home, and Madame La Fontaine being in bed a few short hours were theirs of undisturbed happiness. They talked widely and Desborough found her even more brilliant and charming than the world

declared her to be, and at last they spoke of the future and what it meant to themselves.

'I shall come to India for the opening of your canal,' Anne said. 'My time is my own and I can do as I choose. Will you invite me, dearest?'

'Anne! You would do that? Travel all those miles?'

'More, far more. Do you understand how a woman can love, Jim?'

'I am beginning to,' he said, 'only beginning. Why did we not meet before? Why have we been permitted to waste such good years?'

She smiled a little as if some reminiscence caused her tender amusement.

'You never looked for me,' she said, 'you buried yourself in your work and nearly broke your heart. Jim—one day I have very much to tell you, but not now. Not now. We have so little time for happiness, only a few days and in each of those days but an hour or two. Life is cruel to women. We lose our youth so soon.'

'You have no need to lament the loss of youth,' he said. 'Do you not know how beautiful you are?'

She shrugged her shoulders lightly and walking over to a sofa sat down.

'Come over here to me,' she said. 'We have much to say.'

He needed no second bidding but sat by her side on the low couch and told her again how beautiful she was and how he loved her; and Anne Stonelli leaned

her cheek against his, and listened and tried to forget that a man she called ' husband ' wandered heedlessly in the far-off East.

Desborough left her at seven for she was dining out, and walked back to his club, dined alone and made up some of his arrears of correspondence.

About a quarter to eleven he started out to walk to Westringham's rooms and half-way to St. James Street passed a girl so startingly like Marie Kirkland that he halted and looked after her. She was loitering along and when she heard him stop, turned round, whereupon he resumed his walk with his thoughts switched off his own affairs to Marie's. It shocked him a little to realize how completely he had forgotten her this last fortnight ; so much had happened that the voyage home seemed to have faded into the far distance, and his moment of foolish weakness on board the *Perapia* had quite ceased to trouble him. He tried to comfort himself now with the thought that during these last few days he had not even troubled about his daughter, but back of his mind the thought persisted that he had not behaved well to Marie. For two years they had been friends and he had seen her constantly ; now when she was out of health and because his own hours were filled with more interests and occupations, he left her alone. Then too he knew that the chief reason of his neglect was one caused by his own action that moonlight night off Malta. Try as he would to forget it he was ashamed of his weakness, and he was visiting that sense of shame on the innocent

cause. The thought did not please him, and he determined to write her a long letter that very night, telling her what had happened with regard to the canal, and suggesting a meeting before he sailed. This excellent resolution formed, he arrived at 29 St. James Street and rang at the side door.

Westringham had rooms over a fashionable tailor's and Desborough was ushered by the former's man across a square landing into a long low room lit by three windows, the floor strewn with silken prayer rugs, and the dull blue walls bearing some very fine engravings.

Near one of the windows was a round table and several low chairs and from one of them Westringham rose and hailed him.

'Hullo, Desborough! Awfully good of you to come. You have met Fitzgerald, haven't you? And of course you know Presscott, but I don't think you know Mr. Léon Dare—a—a friend of mine who has just arrived in England. Dare——' He turned half round to the last named of the little group. 'You have heard me speak of Jim Desborough?'

Dare rose from his chair and bowed with ceremonious politeness and Desborough saw at once he was a foreigner despite his English name. Slightly taller than himself Dare was of powerful yet slim build, his hair black, his eyes under their straight black brows dark and somewhat brooding, his nose well formed with sensitive nostrils, and his skin had the clear pallor of the South. The mouth by which Desborough always judged a man was passionate but firmly closed as if

its possessor knew and watched against the pitfalls of his ardent temperament.

Desborough judged him to be about thirty-one or two for the face was cold despite that passionate mouth, and a trifle worn, but he liked Dare's personality and when he liked any one he could be very charming. It seemed to him that Westringham was a trifle nervous for some unaccountable reason, and his relief was certainly noticeable when Dare began to talk to Desborough in his too perfect English. Presently when dinner was half over Fitzgerald mentioned New York and Dare at once took up the subject.

'I have just left,' he said. 'It was abominably hot. I meant to have left in early March but I was detained by a stroke of bad luck.'

'Horses?' young Presscott inquired sympathetically, and Dare very slightly shrugged his shoulders.

'No,' he replied. 'That I should not have minded. I slipped on a stairway and broke my leg. A stupid thing to do and one that kept me crippled for three months. It is the first accident I ever had. It annoyed me.'

His host glanced at Desborough.

'Desborough nearly followed your example,' he said. 'Slipped in front of a motor 'bus and only escaped being killed by rolling over quicker than I have ever seen any man move before.'

Dare gave him a quick look.

'Is that so? Such a thing is an unpleasant shock. But here your traffic is so very well arranged you should

not run so many risks. Was that not lightning ? ’

He was sitting opposite the windows and the blinds not being drawn the reflection of a brilliant flash had lit up the street without, despite its lamps ; Hugh Westringham rose and went over pulling aside the soft net curtain to be greeted by another flash vividly blue.

‘ Yes,’ he said, ‘ it’s damned hot too—worse than ever. If we get a storm it will clear the air, thank goodness.’

Dare had followed him and now stood for a moment looking out into the street over his shoulder.

‘ No one seems to hurry,’ he observed watching the strolling pedestrians. ‘ Yet it will rain. If it spoils the weather for to-morrow I shall be even more annoyed than I was over my accident.’

‘ Why ? ’ Fitzgerald inquired. ‘ Got something particular on ? ’

‘ I wish to drive down into Sussex to pay a call and I dislike driving a long distance over muddy roads. There is the thunder. I am afraid my luck is out.’

A long peal of thunder rolled overhead through the darkness and one or two big drops of rain splashed down whereupon the strolling groups of people began to hurry, glancing upward and moving towards shelter.

Dare came back to the table with its softly shaded lamps and sat down, frowning, and Hugh Westringham glanced half-uneasily at Desborough who, interested by the mention of Sussex, looked across at Dare.

‘ I know Sussex,’ he said. ‘ May I ask what part ? ’

‘Thorswood, near Chichester. It is your ward, Miss Desborough, on whom I am going to call.’

‘Indeed. You know my ward then?’

‘I met her in New York both at Mrs. Van Decken’s house and at Mrs. John Morris’s. We danced together and she granted me permission to call upon her.’

Desborough nodded and went on with his dinner, but he watched the young man rather closely and the longer he watched the more perplexed he became, for it seemed to him that in some way or other Dare was not what he seemed, and the thought disturbed him. He had been utterly wrapped up in his own concerns, but now he remembered Nadia and realized with a little inward start of surprise that she too had her own absorbing affairs and a life in which he had no part.

Later when dinner was over and Hugh had drifted to the piano, Dare came over to his somewhat remote corner and dropped on to the couch beside him.

‘Mr. Desborough, are you going to Thorswood before you return to India?’

Desborough roused from his reverie with a start.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I shall go down to say good-bye to my ward. May I ask if you know her aunt, Lady Gaunt?’

Dare lit a cigarette and leant his head back against the dull gold cushion.

‘I have not yet done so,’ he said rather indifferently. ‘She was not in New York I believe?’

‘No. She dislikes sea voyages. I say, Hugh, play that Viennese waltz Kreisler so often used to give as

an encore. Liebeslied—liebes—something or other.'

Hugh nodded and broke off his scrappy recollections of Coppélia and after a false start began the well-known waltz, while Dare, his black eyes half-closed, listened with thoughts a mile away.

Chapter XIV

THE threatened storm passed away in much lightning and a few peals of thunder, and when Dare strolled out of his bedroom into Hugh's sitting-room the next morning, the world was hot and sun-drenched as ever. He found his friend standing by one of the open windows reading a paper from which he looked up with a little frown.

'Look here—Dare. There's likely to be trouble over this, surely?'

He pointed out a paragraph as he spoke, and as Dare read it a frown drew his black brows together.

"M. Vasiloff has handed in his portfolio to H.M. King Christian, who has appointed M. César Vecchia as Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in M. Vasiloff's place."

Damn Vasiloff! Why should he choose this moment to resign. I wonder what the trouble is?'

'Why not go back and find out?' Hugh suggested, whereupon Dare laughed shortly.

'No, thank you. Politics don't interest me and Vasiloff can get out of his own muddles. Damned fool.'

‘There’s not much love lost between you,’ Hugh said, watching the other man rather curiously. ‘Did you always dislike him so?’

‘Always. Even when I was a child he and I were enemies. My uncle has no personal liking for him though he believes him to be a brilliant statesman. Then there was this affair of Prince Stonelli’s niece. As though one Stonelli in the family wasn’t enough! My cousin Anne is not so happy that her marriage can serve as an example to me!’

‘You told me once it was necessary to bind Italy and Alania closely together.’

‘So it is. But not to the extent of marrying a Stonelli! I have made up my mind, Hugh. Do not let us discuss it any further. Hullo! Here’s a letter from Fifinette!’

He had been glancing over the envelopes beside his plate, and now picking up a mauve one with a large monogram in deep violet on its back walked over to the hearth and opened it, a little smile of amusement softening the set lines of his face.

After a minute or two, still reading, he spoke aloud.

‘Fifinette is in London! What in heaven’s name is she doing here?’

Hugh made no reply, but leaning against the open window-frame watched him as Dare, not raising his eyes from the letter, went on talking.

‘Yes, Fifinette—ma foi, la petite Fifinette! Why has she come to England I wonder.’

‘I wish you’d leave Fifinette alone,’ Hugh said in a

worried voice, roused to attention. 'Oh, I know it's all right. No one else would believe it but I know—but don't you see the child's point of view? She's never met a man like you before . . . and it's not fair to her.'

Dare lifted his dark eyes from the letter and looked at his friend.

'Why not?' he said. 'Fifinette is not losing custom. She's going to enjoy a holiday with no worries.'

'I know . . . you're giving her friendship and, as you say, a holiday, and exacting nothing. It's not that—because in itself that is one of the kindest things you or any man could ever do—but it's the future. What will happen after? Don't you see she won't want to go back to the old ways? She'll have acquired a taste for something better. You've given her a different view of men—a different standpoint from which to consider life—and don't you see it's cruel?'

'I do not intend to let her go back,' Dare said quietly. 'Poor little one, she has her chance at last and I mean to see she profits by it.'

'Not go back. Then—why—what in the world will you do with her?'

'I don't know. That will come later. In any case I mean just what I say.'

Roused to rare indiscretion Hugh hazarded a direct question.

'Why?' and almost immediately uttered a quick apology.

'Forgive me. It's no one's business but your own.'

There was silence for a moment or two and Hugh's man brought in coffee and various breakfast dishes ; when he had left the room once more, Dare spoke, a slight indescribable difference in his tone.

' It is just because I am afraid it *is* some one else's business that I am doing it,' he said. ' Hugh—that supper-party where we first met Fifinette—she spoke to me of—of my father. Now do you see why I am trying to give her a chance ? '

' Oh, good lord ! ' Hugh said very softly, and Dare's eyes narrowed.

' Yes. Just so. And Fifinette shall get a square chance. Now let us drop her as a subject of conversation and have breakfast.

Some hours later Nadia was driving back alone from Crossways, her thoughts busy with all that lay ahead in the immediate future. Desborough's failure to come to Thorswood had been a bitter disappointment to her and she was hurt by his silence : surely he might have written just a word of excuse to her. It was very hot driving through the lanes, despite the fact that it was after half-past six and she gave a little sigh of relief as she entered Thorswood gates ; Gerald was in the stableyard surveying a large white car covered with dust and as Nadia alighted called out to her :

' Hugh's come down with a friend—here's their car. Isn't it a beauty ? It's a Métallurgique . . . and Jim's with them. They are expecting you.'

' Jim ? When did they come ? Who is Hugh's friend ? '

'A man named Dare. Dark. Looks like an Italian. Aren't you going to them? They're on the south lawn.'

'Is your way up the roofs fairly easy, Gerald?'

'Absolutely. Are you going to try? Bravo, Nadia, you are a sport! Come this way. I'll lead.'

He climbed cat-like up the long slope of the laundry roof, Nadia following him in some trepidation and it was at the expense of green-stained shoes and soiled white skirt that she eventually reached her small cousin's bedroom window. It wanted but twenty minutes till dressing-time so she bathed and dressed and went to the drawing-room just as the clock in the lower hall struck the quarter before eight. The drawing-room was always rather dark, and although it was quite light out of doors the candle lights had been switched on filling the room with soft radiance while beyond the three open windows the massed foliage stood dark against a sky of palest turquoise and rosy gold.

There was a curious sense of unreality about the whole scene as if it were a stage setting, and Nadia, quick to appreciate beauty, paused at the doorway, then went across the room to the man who stood by the further window and held out her hand.

'How d'you do, Mr. Dare? Why have they left you alone like this?'

He bent over her hand and kissed it formally.

'Your aunt, Lady Gaunt, has been kind enough to ask me to dinner,' he said. 'I called about five and finding you were not expected till later I went back

to my hotel and changed. How are you, Miss Desborough? It is a very long time since our last meeting in New York.'

'Yes. I really did not expect to see you again. Have you met my guardian yet?'

'He drove with me back to Wroxholme. You say you did not expect to see me again . . . but I told you I was coming to England to see you. I told you. . . .'

'Did you?' Nadia said, smilingly indifferent. 'It's so long ago one cannot remember everything one is told.'

His lips tightened and his eyes met hers with a sudden glint of anger in them.

'That is—unlike you,' he said. 'I believed you had some slight regard for me.'

'Because we danced and rode together four months ago? My dear Mr. Dare, you expect too much if you think that such things mean anything but the pleasant happenings of a passing acquaintanceship. But surely we need not become reminiscent—Hugh Westringham told us you were thinking of making a home in the South. Where did you intend to go?'

He made a sudden movement towards her, then checked himself.

'So you thought of me, after all,' he said and there was a hint of triumph in his tone that set Nadia's temper on fire. 'It is good news.'

She lifted her chin a little in a way she had and gazed at him with eyes that could not quite hide the

flare of anger within her, though her tone as she spoke was sweet and very composed.

‘I am afraid Hugh must receive your thanks,’ she said. ‘He spoke of you—not I. Here is my cousin—I do not think you have met her. Elizabeth, may I introduce Mr. Léon Dare? I will go to find Jim.’

She had punished Dare for his momentary triumph, and as Desborough at that moment entered the room with Lady Gaunt she went up to him and held out her hand.

‘Jim!—how good to see you again.’

Her sore feeling about his neglect vanished at the sight of him, and with a little stab of self-reproach at his heart he shook hands.

‘You must forgive me,’ he said. ‘I could not help myself—but I have till to-morrow evening and there is very much I want to talk to you about.’

He slipped his hand inside her arm and would have drawn her towards the window where Dare stood talking to Elizabeth, but at that moment the expected guests arrived in the persons of Milton Collingwood, the portrait painter, and his charming wife, Sybil, whose mother, thirty years dead, had been a friend of Lady Gaunt’s. Immediately after them came the one other guest, Lady Anne Crosbie only surviving daughter of that Marquis of Reresdale who had been famed in the middle of the last century as a great sportsman and bon viveur, and grand-aunt of the present Marquis, who was a boy at Eton. She was a little old lady, with aquiline features and eyes keen as a hawk’s, dressed in black

brocade and wonderful old lace ; devoted to Enid Gaunt and her children and in particular to Nadia Desborough, partly for the sake of Jim whose story she knew, partly for Nadia's own.

There was rather a crowd of young people, and as all young men adored Lady Anne, Dare was introduced merely from a distance as one of several guests, but all the same during dinner she looked several times in his direction and each time her fine old brows drew together and her mouth pursed itself in perplexity.

Meanwhile Nadia, endeavouring to be her usual charming self to Milton Collingwood for whom she had a great liking, found her mind occupied, much against her will, by Léon Dare. She could not understand why his personality should so obsess her thoughts, and with every moment the desire to hurt him strengthened and deepened in her mind. He had, unencouraged, said so much and done so little ; in New York he had spoken so ardently of following her to England by the next boat, yet he had delayed five months—and her pride was deeply hurt.

Did he imagine her so enamoured of him that she would be grateful for his condescension in coming at all ? Did he think that she had counted the weeks, or fretted over the delay ? Did he believe for one instant that his presence or his absence made one iota of difference to her ? Coldly angry she determined to show him very plainly what place he had in her life, and was roused from her thoughts by the sound of her own name twice repeated by Rupert St. Auld.

‘Nadia—Nadia—Jim is speaking to you.’

She came out of her reverie with a start and looked across at Jim.

‘I’m so sorry. What is it?’

He leant forward, speaking to her across the table.

‘Your aunt has asked Mr. Dare to stay the night, Nadia. Will you not endorse her invitation?’

Nadia looked across at Dare, lips smiling, eyes antagonistic.

‘Why, of course,’ she said. ‘Mr. Dare knows just how welcome he is.’

Dare met the look with one as detached as hers, bowed and murmured some vague politeness, and ten minutes later on the terrace outside the drawing-room window Eve commented on the brief encounter.

‘Why do you dislike Mr. Dare so viciously? I thought he was a friend of yours.’

‘An acquaintance,’ Nadia said indifferently. ‘I am not so prodigal of my friendship as you seem to imagine, Eve.’

‘I like him,’ the younger girl said, idly pulling at the great plumbago growing up the south wall. ‘He is the right kind of man.’

‘There is no reason why you should not,’ Nadia answered. ‘I believe he is a gentleman.’

Eve laughed, took her coffee from the maid who was waiting and looked rather curiously at her cousin.

‘So you go to India to visit Jim?’ she said. ‘I thought you said you were not in love with him?’

‘Your thoughts seem to run on love,’ Nadia said

scornfully, and again Eve gave her odd little laugh, while Dare, who had come to the window unobserved, stepped over the low sill and stood beside them.

'It is considered to be an absorbing subject,' he remarked. 'Forgive my intrusion, but it appeared to be a singularly interesting conversation.'

'Love does not interest my cousin,' Eve answered not without a touch of malice. 'She prefers friendship.'

'Does she?' Dare looked questioningly at Nadia for a moment, and Nadia to her intense annoyance felt her colour deepen.

'Friendship is a great and splendid thing,' she said, hastening to forestall any comment he might make. 'It interests most people, I think.'

'It is rare, certainly,' he remarked. 'But so is love. A great love is the rarest thing in the world, as it is the most unselfish. Love is service and sacrifice and great endeavour . . . and most people think it is merely physical attraction.'

'You demand very much,' Eve said meditatively. 'Do you think such love exists?'

He took up a cigarette from the little table close by and looked away over the darkening garden to the clear gold of the west, and it seemed as though something of the sunset light was reflected in his dark face.

'I do not know,' he said at last, speaking almost to himself, his fingers twisting the cigarette to pieces. 'But if when I come to die I have found out I shall be content.'

Nadia looked at him for a moment, her eyes softened, the hard lines gone from her lips, and Eve made an expressive little gesture and followed his gaze to the glory of the west, her face suddenly white in the sunset, her eyes dilating. Not so, had she found love.

Desborough coming out to join them in company with Sybil Collingwood proposed a stroll in the garden, and Eve vanishing into the house, Dare was left to escort Mrs. Collingwood, and Nadia found herself by Jim's side.

'Why, Nadia,' he said as they paced slowly along a path. 'I thought Enid's invitation would give you pleasure since Dare is a friend of yours. It seems I made a mistake.'

'You did—a little,' she said and slipped her arm within his. 'Mr. Dare annoys me. Besides I want no friends here during your last visit, Jim. There is so much I must discuss with you.'

'My dear, I'm so sorry . . . and I prided myself on my knowledge of your wishes. Let us go off for a walk now; it is beautifully cool and Enid will forgive our desertion.'

'Then I must change these shoes—they're only satin. Wait for me at the gate, Jim. I won't be a moment.'

She hurried off and Desborough strolled to the gate and lit a pipe. He, too, had a good deal to talk to Nadia about, and to-night his thoughts were full of the only two beings who concerned him: Anne and Nadia, the woman he loved and his only child. He felt inclined to tell Nadia what had happened to him, and

man-like did not dream that she might be jealous ; knowing their true relationship as he did he forgot that she knew it not, and was prepared to make demands upon her that might be hard for her to fulfil. As for the parting that must come between Anne and himself—that was inevitable and as such must not be dwelt upon. He fully determined that it should be but a temporary affair till the Peshawur Gulkor canal and bridge was finished ; then he intended to persuade her to divorce Prince Stonelli and in due course marry himself, Jim. Once before he had sacrificed everything that was dear to him for the sake of an abstract principle of honour. He did not intend to do it a second time. Such were his thoughts, disjointed and unsettled enough as he waited for his daughter, and he was relieved when he saw her, a slender white figure in the dusk of the trees, coming along the drive.

‘ I evaded every one,’ she said as she joined him, triumph in her tone, ‘ except Aunt Enid—and being over-scrupulous, I asked her to excuse me for a while as I wanted a little stroll with you. She was most amiable.’

‘ That’s all right then,’ Desborough said and put his hand through her arm resting his fingers on her cool bare skin. ‘ Let’s get off.’

They left the gardens, walked for a hundred yards or so along the main road, and then, guided by Nadia, turned along a lane that led towards the sea.

It was not dark, for a wonderful after-glow lingered in the west, and in the east a full moon was rising, a

globe of honey-coloured light in the dove-hued velvet of the sky ; the air was utterly still and, after the heat of the day, full of scented freshness from the dew that hung on every leaf and blade of grass. All around the country lay silent and peaceful beneath the calm sky and Nadia felt she would be content if such a moment might last for ever as they paused by a gate and looked out over the cornfield to the far-off beauty of the west.

She longed to hear Desborough speak, yet dreaded the breaking of this exquisite silence, and suddenly her pulses began to beat heavily, for letting go her arm he put his hands on her shoulders and looked in her eyes. In the dusk she could see his face was very pale and she could feel his hands tremble a little as they held her.

‘ Nadia,’ he said and there was a note in his voice she had never heard before, ‘ I want to tell you something. Something that means a great deal—that means everything—to me. I—I want you to understand, dear——’

He broke off abruptly, and Nadia catching his emotion began to tremble, too. Had it come, the moment she had hardly dared to think of—was this the meaning of her unhappiness and vexation, of her deep abiding affection for this man who was her guardian ? She was not sure of herself or of him, she was stifled by the conflicting emotions in her heart, and even as she stood looking into his face, waiting almost breathlessly for his next words, she thought of Léon Dare and seemed to see

his dark cold face with the black brooding eyes that could blaze—had she not seen them?—with emotion.

The thought of him at such a moment shook her self-control as even Desborough's presence did not, disturbing and dismaying her and at that moment Desborough began to speak.

'Nadia—I want to tell you what has happened to me. I want you to understand. I—I have fallen in love——'

Nadia tried to check her unsteady breathing.

'Is it some one I know?' she said and his fingers tightened on her bare arms till they hurt, as he answered.

'No—not yet. But I want you to. I want you and she to know one another—I——'

Feeling as though some one had given her a blow in the face Nadia spoke; she was surprised to hear how steady her voice was.

'Why should you want me to know her? She will not be interested in your ward.'

It was on the tip of his tongue to say: 'she will be interested in my daughter,' but the habit of reticence checked him. He did not answer and after a moment she spoke again.

'When are you to be married?'

At the question he loosed his hold of her arms and rested his own on the top bar of the gate.

'We are not going to be married,' he said. 'Because she is married already.'

Something in the very quietness of his tone after its previous agitation, touched Nadia as even the words

did not. With a quick revulsion of feeling she spoke.

‘Jim! Oh, my dear——’

She did not know what to say, but all her love for him rose in her heart and drove away her unworthy jealousy: laying her hand over his where it rested on the gate she tried to assure him of her sympathy and, after a moment, he looked at her with a wry smile.

‘It’s good of you to try and cheer me, Nadia—but I’m not actually unhappy. You see I’ve been up against things and I’ve learned the uselessness of kicking stone walls. When I leave Fort Amrah I shall try to persuade her to divorce her husband and marry me. She’s more than done her duty with regard to him. I wanted you to know for reasons of my own, and equally for reasons of my own I want you to meet her . . . and I’ll arrange that it comes off. But now I’ve told you we will close the subject if you don’t mind and consider it as non-existent. I think it’s time we were getting back.’

For the moment Nadia was silent, experiencing once again what she had believed destroyed for ever. The sudden shutting of the door of confidence between them, the intimacy followed by the withdrawal of which she had complained only three weeks ago. She had thought it a thing of the past, she had imagined that during the last weeks their friendship and affection had been such that no vagaries of temperament could affect it. Bitterly disappointed and hurt she walked by him in silence, along the way she had so recently come wishing the walk and the intimacy might last for ever.

She had been ready enough at the moment to sacrifice all her own feelings if by that means she could comfort him ; but he did not want comfort or desire her help. He had shown her—so she believed—a glimpse of his real self merely for his own reasons. Had he not just said so ?

As they came within sight of the house he spoke again.

‘ By the way, Nadia, I must walk over to Applegate Farm to-morrow and see Marie. I’ve treated her abominably. I wish you would befriend her a little when I have sailed. She’s had such a rotten life.’

‘ Then it isn’t Marie ? ’

Nadia could have bitten her tongue out with vexation the instant the words were uttered, and he was so amazed that he stopped short and stared at her.

‘ Why, what—Marie ? Good heavens no ! What in the world made you think it could be Marie ? ’

‘ I had not thought of it before, I merely asked you because she, too, is unhappily married.’

‘ Oh, I see. Kirkland. Oh, no, my dear, it’s not Marie.’

Silence again, and as they entered the gateway Basil called to them and their unsatisfactory walk was over. At that moment within the house a little comedy was taking place, for Lady Anne Crosbie finding her companion dull, ignored him and stared fixedly at Dare, who was talking to his hostess at the further end of the room. After a few moments Lady Gaunt moved away and Dare, attracted perhaps by the intensity

of the old woman's gaze, turned and met it, and for a moment their glances held, each challenging the other. Then Dare came across the room and stood beside her.

'I am at your mercy,' he said in a low tone. 'Please respect my helplessness.'

Lady Anne's keen eyes twinkled.

'If you wish it, Mr. Dare,' she said, oddly hesitating in speech as if some other name hovered on the tip of her tongue. 'But you must confess it is rather a trial both of my self-control and my good manners.'

The relief was visible on his face at her words; dropping into a chair close beside her he lifted her hand and kissed it.

'My dear Lady Anne, you have always had my profound admiration and now you have my profound gratitude. I confess to an immense uneasiness since I had the great pleasure of meeting you again this evening.'

'You had reason to be uneasy,' she retorted. 'But I am charmed to be of service.'

'You are laughing at me,' he said, reproach in his voice. 'And it's a serious matter.'

She gave him a quick look.

'Serious?'

'Not *too* serious!' he retorted. 'Only pleasantly so. I spent last winter in New York and I intend to spend this summer in England. I am taking a holiday, and you must admit I deserve one!' His eyes were eloquent as they met hers, and at the look her own

softened. With a little gesture of assent, she put the subject aside.

‘ This is your first visit to Thorswood ? ’

‘ It is.’

‘ But not your first meeting with Miss Desborough.’

‘ We met a good deal last winter in New York.’

Lady Anne was silent and Dare watched her closely, then suddenly laughed.

‘ Westringham is guiding my steps,’ he said. ‘ Are you content ? ’

Lady Anne was very far from content, but she could not say so ; she could not say anything at all in the way of reproof or approval. It was not her place to do so and Dare knew it. Yet what was he doing here at Thorswood ? What was Hugh Westringham about ? Uneasy and all the while amused at herself for being so, she laughed.

‘ May I invite you to dine ? ’ she inquired, mock humility in her voice, and he bowed and accepted ceremoniously.

‘ The honour is mine, dear Lady Anne. And—and you approve as to my much needed change of air ? ’

‘ After six months spent in New York, I do not think you are in need of my approval,’ she said a trifle dryly. ‘ But I am known to be discreet. Will that suffice ? ’

Again he bowed.

‘ It will. And—the night ? I am staying at Wroxholme.’

‘ Thursday at eight. Would you like a party ? ’

‘Heaven forbid. Let us dine delightfully and scandalously alone. You’re going?’

‘Immediately. I’m too old to sit up all night and I’ve four miles to drive, not motor. Good-night, Mr. Dare. Thursday at eight.’

She twinkled again, let him kiss her hand and in return sketched him the merest suggestion of an old world curtsy, then turned to Nadia who came up to her at the moment and went away with her, leaving Mr. Léon Dare alone—a very thoughtful young man.

Chapter XV

WEDNESDAY saw many things happen—the two very different people who expected to spend it quietly, found their plans considerably changed.

The first thing that happened was the arrival of a telegram to Léon Dare just as he descended to breakfast in his sitting-room at the White Horse at Wroxholme. He tore it open and swore at the message, then as his man put the last touches to the breakfast table, walked over to the window and stood gazing out into the street. Just opposite beyond the green of its gardens and the limes in a road behind the railway that separated it from the pavement, was the cathedral, grey and hoary amidst its trees, lifting a slender spire into the hot blue of the sky ; below in the wide sunny street the morning traffic of a country town passed by varied by an occasional touring car. All was sleepy and peaceful, and Dare cursed his luck whole-heartedly.

‘ I am leaving for London by the 10.10. I shall not want you. When I am gone take the note I shall leave to Thorswood.’

The man a typical fresh-faced English servant with

the army training still stamped upon him, bowed ; but went towards the door, then hesitated.

‘ Yes, sir. Excuse me, sir, but I understood I was to attend you everywhere.’

Dare looked up from between lowering brows.

‘ It is your business to do as I tell you,’ he said. ‘ Do you understand that ? ’

The man’s lips set. ‘ Yes, sir. I beg your pardon, sir.’

He went out of the room and Dare in a very bad humour began his breakfast, interrupting it to write a brief note to Nadia saying he had been called to London, and not very long after he was travelling to town.

Desborough, too, was going up but by a later train, and immediately after breakfast he suggested that Nadia should walk over with him to Applegate to bid good-bye to Marie Kirkland ; so it came about that they left Thorswood before Dare’s note was delivered.

They talked casually as they drove through the lanes where the branches were still sparkling with dew and the roadway inches thick in white dust ; and arrived at Applegate Farm just before eleven to find Marie in the garden picking raspberries.

She welcomed Jim cordially, but to Nadia her manner was different ; she evidently felt the latter’s antagonism and did not wish to expose herself to any further show of it. Nadia, however, oddly relieved that Marie was not the woman Jim loved, felt none of her

former antagonism but was prepared to be her usual charming self.

‘ You must forgive my coming, too,’ she said. ‘ You see, Jim is leaving by the 12.50, and I wanted to see as much of him as I could.’

‘ Why, of course. Come over here into the shade, and Joan shall fetch you some lemonade. We keep it in the brook and it is ice-cold.’

They chatted impersonally for a moment or two then Marie turned to Jim.

‘ I’ve a letter from Keith,’ she said. ‘ It came yesterday ; when I knew you were coming I thought it best to let you hear what he says about Fort Amrah. Apparently your invaluable Guggoo has been missing for a week. He disappeared the day you left—just an hour or two after you.’

‘ Guggoo missing ? Good heavens ! What can have happened ? It’s unthinkable that Guggoo should leave his job . . . and it shows it is high time I got back. Is there any other news ? ’

‘ Captain Hayward has had a touch of fever, but is all right again now. No, there is no other news.’

‘ Guggoo’s behaviour is news enough,’ Desborough said rather grimly. ‘ I hope there is no hint of foul play. He was always a bit unpopular with the crowd. How does the work go ? Does your husband say ? ’

‘ No. It was a short letter. You go back so soon, Jim ? ’

Desborough looked across at her touched by something in her tone.

‘Yes, I sail to-morrow. Are you wanting to get away, too?’

Marie’s grey eyes left his face and looked away over the garden to the blue Downs and far, infinitely far, beyond.

‘Yes, I want to get away,’ she said very quietly. ‘Miss Desborough, you will miss Jim.’

‘Horribly,’ Nadia’s tone was light just because she was beginning to realize what Jim’s going would really mean to her. ‘But after all it’s not so long you know, Mrs. Kirkland. It is hateful of one’s friends to live so far away, isn’t it? Jim will come back after he has finished at Fort Amrah.’

‘But I shall not be here,’ Marie said, a little smile parting her lips. ‘My home is at Fort Amrah—for good, you see.’

‘It’s not a fit place for you,’ Desborough said abruptly. ‘It’s not a fit place for any woman—least of all a delicate one like yourself.’

‘That is what makes it hard on Keith,’ Marie said, and there was a hint of dignified reproof in her tone as though she defied him to suggest that any one but Keith was the sufferer. ‘And I am having a fine rest and change now. You won’t know me when I come back to Fort Amrah.’

‘That will be about Christmas, I suppose? Well, the work should be getting on to completion by then. I shall talk to Kirkland when I get back, Marie, and try to persuade him to chuck the Frontier.’

They talked for a little while; then Nadia rose.

‘ Jim, I want to go across to the Mill to see old Jackson for Aunt Enid. I shall not be more than ten minutes and you can talk to Mrs. Kirkland if she will excuse me.’

Without waiting for any reply she rose and left them actuated by a sudden and, to herself, inexplicable sympathy for that frail fair slip of a girl with her tragic eyes. Since she knew that Desborough loved a woman and that that woman was a stranger, she had lost her dislike of Marie Kirkland and it shamed her to become aware of her own littleness. Her kind plan miscarried as such plans often will, for Mrs. Morland came out into the garden and stayed chatting amiably, till Nadia reappeared and catching a glimpse of Marie’s face, guessed her poor little secret.

It was growing late, however, and they must go ; together they walked to the gate and with white smiling lips Marie held out her hand.

‘ Good-bye, Jim. I hope things will go well. Good-bye.’

He folded her hand in both of his for a moment and looked down at her, trying not to see her gallant attempt at lightness.

‘ Good-bye, Marie, my dear. God bless you. I shall miss you sadly at Fort Amrah.’

Nadia said nothing, but as Marie turned to her, bent swiftly and kissed her, then walked away by Desborough’s side.

On the way home they talked chiefly of Marie, and Desborough, pleased and surprised by Nadia’s change

of front, was eloquent on the subject of Kirkland.

‘The man’s a selfish, heartless young devil,’ he said. ‘With the fibres of a rhinoceros, Marie pretends to the world that she thinks him an ideal husband, but no living woman could do that. I don’t think her change has done her much good. I expect the thought of rejoining him doesn’t appeal to her very much.’

‘She certainly looks fragile enough for a breath of wind to blow her away. Why doesn’t she leave him, Jim?’

‘Hasn’t given her cause, I suppose—and anyway what prospect has she away from him? Her parents are not wealthy, there are other children. She would not feel she could come back to live on them just because she had made a mistake.’

Nadia was silent for a while, then suddenly spoke hotly.

‘But it’s all wrong! People may talk of women’s independence because they have the franchise, they may declare women are as free as men—but they’re not! They are bound by the opinions of civilized society, and civilized society does not recognize a woman’s right to leave her husband unless he is notoriously unfaithful and either knocks her about or openly deserts her. Have you ever thought how impossible it may be for a nice woman—oh I hate the expression, but you know what I mean—to induce her husband to do either? Men, our class of men, prefer to live formally with their wives and to keep their *affaires* for private occasions. And it is only the exceptional

man who physically ill-treats his wife. You say Keith Kirkland is selfish and heartless—yet the world would not side with Marie should she leave him. It would blame her and pity him, it would remind her that a woman's duty is to be with her husband—and a woman can't go against the whole of her world, Jim. She may say she can but she can't—not the majority of women. Here and there there are exceptions, but they are not the type to get into difficulties. They're too selfish and heartless themselves. It's the gentle sensitive woman who usually makes the mistake of marrying the wrong man, and it's the type that attracts him. There's the tragedy of it. Women ought to be free in the way men are—they ought not to be expected to bear more than a man would bear—God knows they have enough just in being women !'

Desborough looked at her with sudden anxiety ; her impassioned tones disturbed him, awoke his slumbering sense of fatherhood, and stopping he laid his hand on her arm.

'Nadia—I did not know you felt like this. What is it ? Have you any personal reason for speaking so ?'

She met his perplexed scrutiny with steady eyes.

'None in the world, Jim. If I had, you would be the first—and the only—person I would tell. No—it's not personal. It's just how I have always felt since I have been old enough to think at all. And that poor child served as an example. I'll try and give her some pleasure. She needs it.'

On the way up to town—Lady Gaunt, Elizabeth

and Nadia were to spend a day or two in London after seeing Jim off—she spoke of a matter that he hoped she had forgotten.

‘ Jim ! I’m coming to Fort Amrah. Don’t forget.’

In town they went to a shuttered house wreathed in holland covers where an under-housemaid and the caretaker would wait on them, and leaving Desborough for a couple of hours, taxied off to necessary shops ; having arranged to meet Desborough and Hugh at the Carlton at eight. Desborough had written to Princess Anne and went off to Claridge’s, where, as he had hoped, he was told that Her Highness was expecting him.

She was standing by one of the long windows as he entered and held out her hand to him, and at the sight of her drawn white face he started and would have cried out a question, but she stopped him with a gesture and spoke herself.

‘ So you have come,’ she said. ‘ And we have just half an hour in which to say good-bye.’

‘ Half an hour ? ’ he cried. ‘ Anne—what is it—what has happened ? ’

‘ That I am leaving England to-night. I have heard from Alania ; my brother and his son have been assassinated and my father is dying from the shock.’

‘ Dying ? ’ Desborough echoed almost stupidly. ‘ Assassinated ! My God, how horrible ! ’ Then, pulling himself together, he took her hands and held them close. ‘ Is there anything I can do ? ’ he said. ‘ Any way I can be of service to you ? ’

He was on fire to take her in his arms and kiss away

the grief in her eyes, but he held himself back ; this was a moment to give aid if he could, not make love. And he was rewarded by the look she gave him and the words which followed it.

‘ Ah, my dear one, how like you ! You think first of me, not of yourself. It was always the same—even years ago. A woman would be very safe giving her life into your keeping. I wish I might be that woman—I should not talk like this, but I am tired and very sad at heart. You will help me to be strong, dearest—come, let us sit down and talk. There is so much to say.’

She made room on the couch beside her, a servant came in and drew the thin curtains of Chinese blue silk, arranged the lights and withdrew, and then Desborough spoke the words that were trembling on his lips.

‘ Let me come with you—let me come with you ! How can we part like this ? I’ll take care of you—no one shall breathe one word to injure you, but I can’t let you go ! I can’t—it’s too much——’

He held her in his arms, pleading, stammering, praying, and for a moment she let herself lie there with her head against his breast, and try to believe that she had found peace ; but she did not answer and, after a minute or two, feeling the throbbing racing heart against her cheek, she lifted her head and looked at him with wide dark eyes.

‘ Jim dear, you do not mean that. You could not. There is your work, your good name, your daughter—

and for me there is my country and the honour of my House. Do you understand what that means? A queen cannot live for herself, she must live for her people. Jim—it is all over, all over. We met too late.'

For very shame he could say no more, but only hold her to him kissing her lips and her hair and her slim white fingers—and presently a knock came at the door and she lifted her head.

'That is Madame La Fontaine, I told her to knock five minutes before you must go. Kiss me once more and then leave me; oh, Jim, Jim! My darling, my own dear heart.'

Her strength and her courage failed her then and for a moment or two she clung to him weeping piteously, and his own tears mingled with hers as he kissed her over and over again, holding her as though he defied Death itself to take her; and, as he held her, knowing the bitterness of Death itself.

When he left the hotel a few minutes later he hardly knew where he was going, but turned blindly westward; it was still light and he longed for the night that he might be alone with no curious eyes watching him. He had known this parting must come, but not in this manner; a year of separation had not seemed a tragedy, but this was altogether different; this was a parting for life, and he knew it and made no useless attempt to hide it. What had been possible for Princess Anne Stonelli was impossible for the heir presumptive of Alania. He had lost her before she was his, that he knew. If ever they met again it would

be formally, in public, with eyes veiled to indifference and hearts steeled each against the other. Blindly he walked on, staring in front of him with eyes that saw nothing but her face, heedless of everything about him, forgetful of the friends awaiting him, conscious of nothing but the final blow Life had dealt and his own overwhelming despair.

Meanwhile at the Carlton Lady Gaunt and her guests waited in vain, and at a quarter-past eight she decided to wait no longer and they went to their table; Nadia puzzled and rather anxious, for it was not like Desborough to be unpunctual, and this was his last evening of all. Elizabeth, very happy and rather excited, kept the conversation going, for this was the last time she would see her lover till the day or two before the wedding which was to take place during the first week of October, but Nadia was more silent than usual. Just as they sat down, however, a diversion occurred in the person of Léon Dare, who came across the room, greeted the others and turned last of all to Nadia after excusing himself from joining the party on the plea of another engagement.

‘Miss Desborough, I did not think to see you in London. I had to come up unexpectedly.’

‘We have come to see my guardian off. He sails to-morrow from Tilbury.’

‘Is that so? May I call upon you afterwards? I am staying with—’ he paused a moment and looked across at Hugh. ‘I am staying as usual with Mr. Westringham.’

'We are not at home to visitors I am afraid,' Nadia replied. 'Are we, Aunt Enid? We are staying for two days in our boxes with hardly any servants and the kitchen forks. You don't understand the allusion. Never mind.'

Taking not the slightest heed if the others heard him Dare repeated his request, adding:

'I wish to make a definite engagement with regard to seeing you again. Please permit me to do so. When do you return to Thorswood?'

'To-morrow evening. But we leave for Scotland almost at once.'

'And in Scotland you go to your own house, where I may call? You will give me your address?'

What possessed Nadia she did not know, but all her unhappiness and disappointment added to her present growing anxiety suddenly culminated in one furnace of exasperation. In the desire to revenge herself for the hurt she had received she deliberately tried to hurt in return.

'Aunt Enid will be charmed to give you all particulars I am sure,' she said. 'But as for me, you must please excuse me. I am not interested. My movements concern only my friends.'

He flinched despite his pride; the blow was so unexpected and so public. For a second or two he stood quite still looking at her, a curious ashen pallor whitening his dark skin; then he took his underlip between his teeth, bowed very low and without a word walked away from the table. As for Nadia, woman-

like, she regretted the words the instant they were spoken, but she was not going to admit it, and a trifle pale herself she began her soup. Westringham, however, was dismayed and showed it, for he leaned forward and spoke across the table to her, eyes and tone eloquent of his distress.

‘Nadia—why in the world did you speak to Dare like that? He is such a dear chap. And—and there are other reasons. I thought you were friends. Do let me go after him and fetch him back.’

‘Not for the world!’ Nadia’s tone was low and tense. ‘Mr. Dare and I are *not* friends. Please change the subject, Hugh.’

Lady Gaunt looked at her niece in utter perplexity; her gentle soul detested the giving of pain and Nadia had very publicly inflicted it. What was the matter with this loved niece? Nadia was usually so sweet-tempered, and this last week or two she had been utterly unlike herself. Distressed and worried, she would have spoken, but Hugh forestalled her by speaking of Desborough’s non-appearance, adding:

‘Hope to goodness he hasn’t tried falling underneath any more motor-buses.’

‘Falling under motor-buses?’ Nadia looked up with a little cry of dismay. ‘What d’you mean, Hugh?’

‘Didn’t he tell you? The other day—Saturday I think it was—just as we were crossing by Hyde Park Corner he slipped on something and went down right in front of a ’bus. He rolled out of the way in the nick of time. I’ve never seen such a close thing.’

For a second Nadia stared, eyes dilated, face white, then involuntarily she looked across at Lady Gaunt.

‘Aunt Enid,’ she breathed. ‘You hear?’

In bewilderment Hugh looked from one to the other, wondering what possessed them, and Elizabeth with that ready tact that was later to make her one of the most brilliant of the younger hostesses, began to talk to him of her immediate plans, thus distracting his attention.

But as they left the table later and still Desborough had not appeared, Nadia laid her hand on her aunt’s arm.

‘Gulab Singh sailed last Tuesday, did he not? What does it mean, Aunt Enid? What does it mean?’

When Hugh Westringham returned to St. James Street it was still fairly early and he did not expect to find Dare in. He was mistaken however, for Dare was in the living-room reading a paper from which he looked up as Hugh entered.

‘You’ve not heard the news? The Crown Prince of Alania and his son have been assassinated—shot as they were driving. King Christian is not expected to survive the shock many days. No, it’s not in the papers yet. I received a cypher message sent through from Caryllon.’

‘Good Lord!’ Hugh dropped into a chair and stared at his friend. ‘How horrible! I thought Alania at least was safe from such outrages.’

‘So it is as a rule. His Majesty has always gone about amongst them as one of themselves. Caryllon

tells me the crowd literally tore the life out of the assassin—he was a foreign Jew. Afterwards half Prégatz went to the Palace and gave a demonstration of sympathy and loyalty. They're a fine people, but hot-headed.'

'And you? How does it affect you? You'll go back?'

'No. I am not wanted. If I go back my father would head a rival faction—composed chiefly of foreigners—against her Highness, Princess Anne. I'm best out of the way. But—I shall leave England.'

'Why?'

'One of Vasiloff's secretaries is in town. He was at the Carlton and saw me as I came out. I avoided him, but he will not rest till he has had an interview and you know what that means.'

'Yes. I may offer my sympathy.'

'I thank you.' Dare's voice had a little touch of formality, then, throwing the paper aside, he leaned forward clenching his hands one on the other and regarding his friend silently with brooding eyes.

'As always I give you my confidence,' he said abruptly after the silence had lasted several minutes. 'I am going to try a very new thing. I am going to India—wait! and, if he will take me, I am going with Mr. Desborough.'

'But—but you can't!' Hugh cried explosively. 'Good heavens, you don't——'

'Please! I have told you my plans and you know I never speak till my mind is made up.'

‘Alania?’

‘I have already explained my position with regard to Alania. In honouring you with my confidence I did not ask for criticism.’

Hugh bit his lip to keep back an angry retort and was silent, whereupon Dare stretched out a hand and laid it on his arm.

‘Hugh—you can see how I feel? Mon Dieu! do you think I will risk a second time what I have endured to-night? Yet if I stay here I cannot keep away . . . to be so treated . . . by her! And for what?... What have I done that she has so utterly changed? If I were her footman she could not be more insulted or insulting! I will not permit it! I cannot bear it!’

His voice, throbbing with indignation, shook on the last words and his mouth twisted convulsively. Springing to his feet he went over to the window and stood there, biting on his knuckles as he struggled against the emotion that threatened to break down his composure.

Hugh, deeply distressed, stared at him helplessly; all his sympathy was for his friend but like most of his race he was incapable of putting it into words. After a minute or two he rose and going across the room laid a hand rather awkwardly on Dare’s shoulder.

‘She—she’s not like that as a rule. She didn’t mean it—she——’

He floundered and broke off and Dare wheeled round, his eyes ablaze through the tears that dazzled them.

‘If she did not mean it then it is all the more cruel!’

To be spoken to in such a fashion and before others ! Does she think my love an insult to be flung back in my face with lies—does she think—does she——’

He was shaking all over and the tears suddenly ran down his face ; with an oath he broke away from Hugh’s touch and went out of the room ; and Hugh dropped down in a chair close by staring after him and speaking his worried thoughts aloud.

‘ Now, what the hell am I to do ? ’

Chapter XVI

‘**S**O this is your work? My congratulations, Mr. Desborough! It is worth doing.’

Dare’s voice had the ring of genuine appreciation that thrills the hearer and Jim Desborough flushed a little under his tan.

‘It interests you? Come over here, then.’

He led the way across the broken ground, stepped over the piled rails of the constructor’s little line, dodged the mules bearing sacks of lime and driven by a naked small boy and, Dare following, pointed out the work being carried on around the last of the piers that supported the arches carrying the canal across the nullah.

‘You can see how we had to fight the crumbling earth,’ he said. ‘Look at this measurement—we had to dig that number of feet till we got down to rock—this arch pier—reinforced concrete and here ’—he led the way a yard or two further—‘there are twisted steel reinforcement rods——’

He became more technical as he continued and Dare’s attention began to wander, so absorbing did he find the human side of the work displayed.

Beneath a white-hot sky the distant Hills and the wide plain lay parched and arid, the ground cracked with drought, the leaves of the trees brown and withered ; yet the scene around Dare as he looked was one of amazing activity.

Myriads of men swarmed about and around the sides of the nullah and the huge stone revetments and piers of the nearly-completed bridge. Not more than a hundred yards above the bridge where it ran, out across the river bed, the left bank faced with ferro-concrete was interrupted by a dam more solid, if possible, than the banks themselves. Above it a broad footway gave access, if necessary, to the sluices which would, in time of flood, be manipulated by a travelling winch on rails.

Below the footway between the light piers were double flood-gates with an upper and lower leaf, the sluices leading to a waste-channel that joined the river about half a mile away, thus giving extra relief for the water in time of specially heavy floods. This waste-way was also concrete-lined and from it various small channels, each controlled by sluices, would in their turn irrigate the land for miles around.

The great bridge itself was nearly completed, its new massive ugliness unsoftened by beauty of line or colour, yet giving in its very rawness a suggestion of lasting power. Dare gazed at the hordes about him with all the eager interest of a complete stranger ; the veritable town of tents and huts, the latter for the white labourers, foremen, rivetters and the like, the sheds

filled with government stores and stacked ranks of spare tools, chains, duplicate parts.

All about the bridge and the glaring newness and embankments, the scene was alive with brown figures toiling in the sun ; here a row of men dug earth and sand throwing it into the little row of trucks waiting on the constructor's lines, there they led strings of mules laden with sacks, others were gathered about the great arches, and others again swarmed about the scaffolding.

The air was noisy from the clang of tools, the grunting and snorting of the little shunting engines, the cries of the men as they shouted to one another, and the long whine of the crane tipping earth by the ton. Everywhere was life and movement and the sense of a great work nearly done—to Dare the most exhilarating thing that he had ever seen. Desborough left him to wander about as he chose, being far too busy to give thought to anything but the work in hand, and it was a good two hours later when the heat was truly fiery that he remembered Dare's existence.

He found him watching the taking down of some scaffolding.

'You'd better get home or to the club,' he said. 'To-morrow I shall be riding over to the regulator—it's a seven mile ride if you care to come. It might interest you.'

'It certainly would interest me. It is a marvellous work this canal of yours. It will go to your club, Desborough, and wait for you there.'

‘Better lie down! September is the worst month of all out here,’ Desborough said as he rode away, then promptly forgot all about him.

That night as they sat together in the club-house for an hour’s rest after a dinner of tough boiled fowl and somewhat peculiar pudding, Dare began to talk and ask questions and presently Kirkland, Hayward and Rowe joined them and each proceeded to instruct the visitor according to his lights.

Presently Kirkland turned to Desborough.

‘By the way,’ he said. ‘Did you ever come across that queer chap Burke again? I hear he’s working tooth and nail for the Labour fellas.’

‘I met him two or three days before I sailed, quite by chance in the street. Clever—and sincere. Ideals all wrongly worked out from perfectly sound principles.’

‘Didn’t see much of the sound principles here. I thought him a damn fool,’ Kirkland retorted. ‘Chuck the matches across, Rowe.’

Rowe obeyed and Dare suddenly breaking off something he was saying to Hayward, spoke to Desborough.

‘You built the Prégatz bridge across the Danube, so you will know—what year was it finished?’

Desborough’s face hardened as it always did at any mention of those far-off Alanian days.

‘Eighteen ninety-nine,’ he said briefly, then impelled by some reason which he did not understand, added the question: ‘Did you know Prégatz?’

‘I was born there,’ Dare answered. ‘I have Alanian

blood—as well as that of several other nations in my veins. A mongrel is it not you call it ? ’

Somebody laughed and Desborough’s tightly set lips relaxed.

‘ Not much of the mongrel about you,’ he said ; and was glad when the khitmutgar entered, looked round and came across to him, salaamed, and spoke.

‘ Heaven-Born, Lehr Khan is without, and craves to speak with his Sahib,’ he said, adding in a lower tone as Desborough excused himself and turned from the table, ‘ He bid me say, Sahib, that the matter is one of urgency that will bring relief to the mind.’

‘ Good. Is he without, or at my house ? ’

‘ Without, Excellency, even in the verandah.’

Desborough nodded and went out into the thick darkness ; for the moment, coming from the light, even the verandah, lit as it was by lanterns, seemed absolutely black. Then, just beside him, he saw the tall white-clad figure of Lehr Khan.

‘ Well,’ he said, ‘ what is it ? ’

Lehr Khan salaamed deeply ; he had travelled half over the world with Desborough as his personal servant and he made no pretence to hide his joy at having his beloved master back once again.

‘ Sahib, there is news. Guggoo has returned. He awaiteth the Presence even now.’

‘ In the hut ? ’

‘ Even so, excellency. Is it the Heaven-Born’s will that I bid him stay or kick him with the foot ? ’

Desborough shook his head, suppressing a smile.

‘Keep him. I shall return very soon. Well—what is it?’ for Lehr Khan did not move, but looked at him suddenly with an expression on his impassive face Desborough had never before seen. At his question, the answer came suddenly :

‘It is that we thy servants rejoice in thy return, oh thou who art our father and our mother ! Without thee the night has been black and we have eaten dirt because our hearts were sore and our lives desolate. Now thou hast returned the light has come once more unto we who be thy children and thy servants. Sahib—Heaven born ! in the name of those that serve thee, I give thee greeting !’

He bowed very low, then straightened himself to his six-foot-one of height ; the man’s eyes were blazing in his dark face, his bearded lips trembling with the intensity of his feeling and Desborough would have been less than human had he not been touched by so spontaneous a welcome.

As it was he looked straight into the glowing dark eyes and spoke as he felt, beginning in English then lapsing into the vernacular.

‘That is good hearing, Lehr Khan. I have heard that you have served Hayward Sahib well since I went away, and that thou hast urged those of thy blood who work for us here to do likewise. I heard this many days ago, and in consequence I brought back a small gift. Go back to my house and I follow.’

He cut short the man’s words and went back into the club. ‘I’m sorry, but I shall have to leave you,’

he said. 'I'm wanted over at the camp. No, not you, Hayward. You follow on later. Dare, would you like to come? Good-night everybody!'

He turned on his heel and went out, followed by Dare, and they mounted the horses which Lehr Khan had ready and rode away through the darkness, the way lit by occasional flashes of lightning far down on the southern horizon.

Lehr Khan, having taken a short cut across the fields known only to himself, was at the hut by the time Desborough arrived, and Desborough leaving Dare strode into the bare, untidy room which reeked of the smell of oil-lamps and was stacked with papers, and took a small parcel from inside a big portmanteau. He handed it to his servant, watching the man with some curiosity, and Lehr Khan, his fingers trembling with excitement, untied the string and unwrapped the papers, then uttered an exclamation and held out at arm's-length his master's gift—a silver wrist-watch on a broad leather strap.

'Sahib! Heaven-Born! Excellency! It is even the teller of time such as the Heaven-Born himself wears upon the wrist! It is even thus I who am most unworthy art honoured! I thy servant, the humblest of those that seek thee——'

He broke off overwhelmed by his feelings and Desborough looked into his eager, hawk-like face and filled in the pause himself.

'But not the least faithful, Lehr Khan,' he said. 'Now send me Guggoo.'

Three minutes later as he sat behind his paper-strewn table, the lamp pushed away so that the shadow fell upon his own face, the wizened little form of the old hillman entered, wrapped in the red duffle garment of the Hills, his eyes screwed up and blinking in the light.

He salaamed and shot one keen glance round the room, then at Desborough's brief greeting came up to the table and peered across it at the white man.

Desborough let him stand there as he leant back in his chair and surveyed him, trying to read something from attitude or expression—a task he soon gave up, for Guggoo, as always, puzzled him completely. After that vain effort he spoke.

‘Guggoo, there are many and strange tales abroad of thy doings. What is this that comes to my ears? Why didst thou leave?’

Contrary to all custom, Guggoo showed neither anxiety nor any sort of embarrassment at the question; instead his little deep-set bright eyes gave Desborough back as steady and impenetrable a gaze as his own.

‘I left, oh, Desborough Sahib, because of the evil that is abroad,’ he said. ‘Rememberest thou, that which I spoke one day e’er thou did’st leave for thine own country? It was while it was yet early and Hayward Sahib called thee to listen. Think, Sahib!’

Desborough's brows drew together and his foot tapped impatiently on the floor; he recalled the

incident well enough, but he wanted to get at Guggoo's side of the matter. At that moment Dare entered, saw he was not alone and would have withdrawn, but Desborough spoke.

'It's all right. Come in, Dare. Now, Guggoo, I remember. What of it?'

The old man looked across at Dare, then back to Desborough.

'We are not alone, Sahib.'

'What is that? Not alone? Is thy news so vital to the Raj that it may not be uttered before one of my friends?'

'That is for the Sahib to judge!' the old man responded, not without dignity. 'I will however speak. Desborough Sahib, the word is given and trouble approaches. From beyond the Hills men arm for battle and draw near. The fight may be long or brief, but it comes, it surely comes.'

'Then it is to Rowe Sahib you should speak, not to me,' Desborough said, still gazing at him with steady, level gaze. 'This is a matter for the Government, not for one who builds canals, oh, Guggoo.'

'Yet I have come to thee, Sahib, for it concerns thy honour and the honour of thy work. Think, Sahib, of the great weir and the road that leads thither. Would it not be easy while the soldiers of the Raj fight around Amrah and the villages for some private foe to lift his hand there, 'gainst thee? Be warned, Sahib! I speak that which I do know.'

Desborough's figure stiffened, his eyes lost their

inscrutability and lit up with sudden eager interest, and he put a sharp question :

‘ What do you know ? ’

The old man met the look unwaveringly.

‘ Much, Sahib, that I cannot tell—yet. There may come a day when Allah will grant that I speak to you of what lies hidden in my heart. And look, Sahib, I speak not this to warn the Raj—for the Raj and its troubles I care not, I whose home is beyond the Hills. But for thee, Desborough Sahib, I care much, and in this thing is thine own honour and the work of thy life wrapped up, and to thee I speak warning. Have I leave to go, Desborough Sahib ? ’

Desborough started ; the last words had struck a chord in his memory awaking some dim recollection of years long past. Leaning forward he stared at Guggoo, staring at him and searching his memory for aid, and Guggoo without waiting for the spoken permission, salaamed as profoundly yet less humbly than Lehr Khan and slipped out of the room.

‘ You want him back ? ’ Dare said. He had been an absorbed spectator of the scene, and though he did not understand one word of the language he guessed that Desborough had not intended the old man to go so quickly.

‘ No—no. Never mind. He’s an odd old devil and there is no holding him. Strange though—I could have sworn when he spoke those last words that I knew him before—years ago——’

He broke off in his disjointed words and sat frowning

and staring at the white-washed wall in front of him, and presently Dare spoke again.

‘ Did he bring you bad news ? ’

Desborough started out of his reverie.

‘ He warned me of trouble, but he’s done that all the summer. He has an idea that the Afghans intend to attack before very long. The border tribes are certainly displaying a good deal of activity all along this part of the Frontier, but that might or might not mean anything.’

He reached for his pipe, knocked it out on his heel and rose to his feet ; in the lamp-light his face looked worn and paler than usual and there were grim lines about his mouth and eyes that had deepened noticeably these last few weeks.

‘ It’s a hell of a night,’ he said, and pushing open the door stood for an instant staring into the hot darkness. ‘ D’you feel at all tucked up, Dare ? These occasional storms we have make September the worst time of all.’

‘ I am not cool,’ Dare answered with a smile. ‘ But I can stand great heat without too much discomfort. I come chiefly of Latin stock and I have travelled these last two years in hot countries. You yourself look tired and worn-out. Are you well ? ’

Desborough lit the pipe, threw down the match and watched it burn out on the iron-hard earth, then turned back to the writing-table.

‘ Yes. I’m well,’ he said. ‘ But I shall be glad when this job’s finished. I’ve had enough of this place. I want to get away.’

‘ You will return to England and—and your ward ? ’

‘ Perhaps—for a time. I have made no plans. At all events I shan’t stay there. Probably I shall go to Canada.’

Dare nodded.

‘ That wanderlust—I am sorry to use a German word but it expresses just what I mean—it is a fatal thing. Now I long to settle down in some place I like—perhaps Paris—and make a home.’

‘ Why don’t you, then ? ’

‘ Because if I did I should not be content to be alone. I should want a wife. And I do not wish to marry.’

Desborough made a sudden movement as though the subject was distasteful to him.

‘ It’s late,’ he said abruptly. ‘ We ought to turn in for I must be up at five. Pack your pillows. It’s not well to lie flat these nights—and you’re too new to the country to remember.’

‘ I will remember—and to-morrow you take me to the—what d’you call it ? the regulator ? Yes ? ’

‘ Yes. To-morrow we ride over. Good night, Dare. Sleep well.’

Dare was sleeping in a little one-roomed bungalow adjoining that had been put up to house some of the accumulation of plans and papers, and Desborough, after seeing him enter, turned back into the room and pulling a sheaf of papers towards him began to work out some of the numerous calculations that the work demanded. Sheer hard grind and nothing else would keep away thought, and to think was the thing he dared

not do. In a couple of months or so the canal would be finished and till then he determined to keep his private troubles at bay, yet more than once as he sat frowning over the page of figures before him, he bit fiercely on his knuckles as he worked, to stop the trembling of his mouth, and the figures were dazzled and indistinct.

Chapter XVII

THE next afternoon about five Dare rode out with Desborough to the head of the canal, where the great regulator tapped the river. He talked very little, for what he saw was so new to him and of such interest that he could spare no attention for anything else, till they turned the low hills that had hidden the distance from them and saw the great dam before them.

Following Desborough, they rode up to the engineer's house, dismounted and leaving their horses to the care of an old Pathan, were greeted by Mrs. Steevens, who looked whiter and more worn than usual.

'It's glad to see you back, sir, I am!' she exclaimed 'My man is ill. It's fever. He's had a sharp attack and he's as weak as a kitten and as worried over something as you never did see! He won't tell me what it is, but he'll tell you. Mary! Come and get some tea for Mr. Desborough and this gentleman.'

Mary, a sallow-faced child of fourteen, came in answer to her mother's call, and while Desborough went to see Steevens Dare sat down in the bare white-washed room Mrs. Steevens still called the 'parlour' and made himself very agreeable. Desborough had given him an

idea of the life led by the 'non-commissioned' ranks of the men who serve India and he soon had Mrs. Steevens quite at her ease with him. She talked exclusively of the past; to her the future was so unknown a quantity with its fever, its privation, its appalling climate that she preferred to ignore it and take each day as it came. Camden Town was the goal of her ambitions: 'a nice little house with Venetian blinds and gas in the rooms looking out into High Street,' so she told Dare. 'I feel sometimes as if I can't bear the loneliness and the quiet and all these natives round me,' she added. 'And the trams and the buses—I'd like to see it all again.'

'Why do you not?' Dare asked, and Mrs. Steevens looked at him in amazement that any one should ask so simple a question.

'Why, the money, sir!' she exclaimed. 'It would cost all our savings and more to get home. And then my man couldn't be left . . . and what should we do when we wanted to get back? We couldn't do it.'

'But you do not want to spend the rest of your life here? You and your children?'

'It's not good for the children, that's the worst of it,' she said and plaited the fringe of the dreadful chenille tablecloth with nervous fingers.

'It's a bad thing in India to be country-bred. There's never any companions for them, and hardly a white person they ever see. But it might be worse. We've kept healthy, and Bob—Bob's my husband, sir—likes his work. He's been thirty years at canal work.'

‘Thirty years! Here?’

‘No, no. Different parts of India. We were down in Bengal till four years ago.’

Dare made no comment, but led the conversation to the children—not a difficult task—and his hostess waxed quite cheery and dispensed tea and Huntley & Palmer’s biscuits, and Desborough coming in sat down with them to the meal.

Directly it was over they bade Mrs. Steevens good bye, Desborough leaving a couple of old illustrated papers behind—a Godsend to the lonely spot—and went out to inspect the work.

The great masonry dam, or weir, as it more properly should be called, was built across the branch of the river that flowed over the reef, three miles away, to hold up the water which lay in a great sheet behind it. In that part of the weir nearest to the canal head, was a long line of sluices fitted at a low level to keep up a ‘scour’ and prevent the accumulation of deposit, and a second line of regulating sluices above. At either end of the weir were massive and lengthy revetment walls and embankments required to protect the wings and prevent the flood turning the extremities of the weir and swamping the land around. All was dry at present below the weir, for the waste water above it ran over a spill-way nearly at right angles that was built high enough to relieve pressure only in the times of greatest flood.

‘What are those places like forts at either end of the weir?’ Dare asked after he had accompanied Des-

borough on his lengthy inspection, and Desborough smiled rather grimly.

‘They look what they are. Block-houses to be held in time of trouble.’

‘Do you get much here, then?’

‘Quite enough. This isn’t a civilized part of the country you know, Dare. This is the Frontier. We fought for our lives here and for the life of India and we’ll have to fight again. Away down there—he waved his hand to the south and east—‘the people of the plains are gentle enough for the most part, industrious, contented. Over there is Afghanistan and a race that lives to fight. Here in the North every man’s occupation is bloodshed and no law or order as we understand it, prevails. The tribes are good fellows many of ’em, gentlemen according to their lights, bold and cruel and brave—and some of ’em are loyal. But the breath of their nostrils is the slaying of their enemies and the British Raj is the chief of ’em.’

He stopped a huge bearded Pathan as he ceased speaking and spoke a few quick sentences in rough Urdu; the man salaamed, and answered with a proud smile that displayed two rows of faultless teeth, dazzlingly white in his dark face, and walked off when Desborough dismissed him with an irresistible swagger, twirling an upturned moustache.

Desborough turned to his companion with a grin.

‘See that fella? He’s my head man here under Steevens—first-rate chap. He’s a Kuskru Khel from Khyber way, and is even now at the height of bliss

because on his leave—he had five days last week—he killed the fifth and last of his neighbour's sons. It was a hereditary feud and the last score before this had been when the neighbour had shot this fella's brother. So it's one up to him, and unless some other branch of the family takes it up, he's got the final score and wiped 'em out.'

'It is more savage than remote Alania,' Dare said with a smile. 'I thought, there, we were three centuries behind the time. But the war altered things with us. It taught discipline and the power of endurance. It welded the people together and it made of them a loyal and courageous race, eager to develop their country and the best of their resources. And my cousin would have been the first man to help them, the finest leader they could have because he could rule himself and was therefore fit to rule them. He was kind and just and very brave and they loved him—and some foreign devil spawned by Bolshevism has struck him down!'

His voice rang with passionate anger roused by the memory of that recent happening at Prégatz; forgetful of his self-betrayal, forgetful of everything but the train of thought that had led to this, Dare struck his hand on the great wall against which they stood.

'He was a gallant gentleman,' he said and his voice was deep and tender. 'And he would have led my country to great things.'

Desborough made no answer, but after one quick look, gazed out across the dry concreted bed of the canal at their feet to the long distant foothills, dim

through a coppery haze of thunder-clouds. He was too astounded to speak and he realized that for the moment his companion did not realize what he had said, but the amazing news of Dare's identity and his connection with the Royal House of Alania had for him a deeper significance than it would have had for any other man. Silently he awaited his companion's words. They came after a few moments.

'I have told more than I intended,' Dare said. 'Mr. Desborough—you know Prégatz, you knew me as a boy. Do you not remember?'

Turning sharply Desborough faced him and for a moment the two stood each gazing in the other's eyes, Desborough searching his memory as he searched the dark stern face before him, and suddenly light flashed in that remote shadowy corner of the past and at the same moment he bowed deeply.

'Prince Léon—I ought to have recognized you! I ask your pardon.'

Dare took a quick step forward and laid his hand on the other's arm; a smile lit up his eyes.

'Desborough—do you think I meant you to? I want your friendship—I want it so much, more than you know. Let there be no more formality than there is between Mr. Hayward and yourself. I have very much to tell you, but not now—later—to-night—if you can spare the time to listen. You are a famous man, one of the most famous in your work in the whole world. Except for my four years of fighting against Germany and Austria I have never accomplished one

thing worth the doing ! Desborough—Jim—will you give me the friendship I ask ? ’

He held out his hand with a look that wrung Desborough’s heart with a sudden sharp stab of anguish ; it seemed for the moment that Anne was looking at him with those dear eyes he was never to see again on earth.

The likeness was so sudden, so cruel in its poignancy that for the moment Desborough could not speak. Under his sunburn he went white to the lips, the bare plains, the coppery heat-haze, the distant stony hills and the glaring masonry of the weir and embankments all vanished—instead of the Frontier he stood once again in the soft lamplight of the room where he had bidden a last farewell to the woman he loved and before him was her face—the face that haunted him day in, day out. With a choking sound in his throat he turned away, bowing his forehead down against his clenched hands, leaning upon the wall for support, while the world swung about him.

He heard Prince Léon’s voice sharp with anxiety uttering his name, felt his arm strong as steel go round him and after a moment lifted his head.

‘ I’m all right—it was the heat—I suppose I must have been dizzy. I’m sorry——’

‘ Had you not better go back to the house ? ’ Can I not telephone to the Fort to tell them to bring Mr. Rowe’s car out ? ’

With a determined effort, furious at his own weakness, Desborough pulled himself together.

‘No, no. I’m quite all right now. I can’t imagine what made me do such a damned silly thing. We’ll be getting home. This isn’t a particularly healthy spot after dark.’

Then as he was about to mount, remembering his manners :

‘Did you mean what you said just now?’ he said. ‘Because if you did’—his hand went out suddenly and the other grasped it and wrung it hard—‘Then yes. And with all my heart!’

They hardly exchanged a word as they rode back to Fort Amrah, but pushed their horses and made all speed they could to get home before darkness fell, arriving at the bungalow just as Hayward was beginning to be a trifle anxious, knowing the nature of the road they had to travel.

They went over to the club to dine, and there as it was mail-day found every one deep in letters. Kirkland joined them later after leaving them to dine with Rowe.

‘Hullo, Desborough! Hullo, Dare! Mail in . . . and reports bad floods on the journey. What a blazing hell of a night it is!’

‘It’s pretty bad; any news of your wife?’

Kirkland dropped into a chair and stretched out long well-made legs, complacently surveying his extremely well-fitting boots.

‘Yes. She says nothing about her health, so I conclude it’s better. She’d say quick enough if it wasn’t. Talks of coming back next month.’

‘Does she?’ Desborough was silent a moment, then changed the subject abruptly. ‘By the way, Kirkland, I think you ought to go over to the weir and see Steevens. He’s got a bad dose of fever and I didn’t altogether like the look of him.’

‘Right-o. I’ll go to-morrow. Any news from anywhere?’

‘No. None. Is there any truth in the rumour about the tribes getting restive, d’you think?’

‘Dunno. There’s certainly plenty of rumour, but then that’s nothing fresh. Doesn’t your precious old monkey-man ever find anything out? Or wouldn’t he tell you if he did?’

‘He might. Never asked him. What do you think, Rowe?’

Rowe tossed aside the *Illustrated London News* that had come from home with his letters and looked through his spectacles in owl-like fashion.

‘There’s a lot of trouble brewing underground. Whether it will come to anything or not is another matter, but this wretched old scoundrel of a mullah—Ben Adin or something or other like that, sounds Arabic or Persian—is going about from village to village, and though I’m not able to prove that there’s anything in it more than a usual begging pilgrimage or travel, yet I’m sure in my own mind that he’s up to mischief. There’s a general uneasiness everywhere. Hullo, here’s the Colonel.’

Colonel Hewitt, a big ruddy Irishman, came in at that moment with Toby Presscott and Rowe turned to

him to substantiate his opinion. Hewitt sank into a creaking armchair, shouted for a drink and looked round the little group.

'The mullah is out preaching a holy war,' he said. 'I got word to-night from Peshawur to look out for trouble. Of course it may come to nothing but I think there'll be a scrap. I wish we could have had your canal through first, Desborough. A camp of coolies like yours is a bit awkward to handle. Besides, for the work's sake it would have been better.'

'Yes. That's true. Do you expect it soon?'

Hewitt shrugged his shoulders, and Dare joined in the conversation.

'Would the canal works be endangered?'

'They might. But I hardly think it likely. There is no reason why they should waste time destroying a work of that sort when Fort Amrah and many outlying places await them. They want plunder and all that it means, and the canal regulator will yield them nothing but masonry, and machinery they neither want nor understand how to use.'

Desborough, studying the bowl of his pipe, spoke without looking up.

'Is there any indication of the particular locality, Colonel?'

'Not at present unfortunately. It seems pretty general all along this part of the Border. However in a day or so I shall probably have more definite news.'

Dare looked across at Desborough but said nothing, and Desborough after a moment's silence repeated

Guggoo's warnings, whereupon Brennan, one of the junior officers, chimed in with an eager :

' Hope we get a chance of going for 'em really well, sir ! They've been above themselves for a long time now. You'll give me plenty to do sir, I hope ! '

Hewitt regarded his subaltern with a kindly twinkle ; he loved keenness and Brennan was a glutton for work.

' Yes, you shall have plenty to do, Brennan,' he said in his rich south of Ireland voice. ' I can promise you that at all events. By the way I received a whole budget of illustrated papers. I will send them over to the club in the morning. They are full of this Alanian tragedy even now. The murdered Crown Prince seems to have been much loved by the masses and Alania has gone solid against revolution and swears by the new heir—Anne I think her name is. She appears to be a clever woman as well as a very beautiful one.'

' Is her portrait published, Colonel Hewitt ? ' Dare inquired.

' Yes. Several of 'em. I remember seeing her once in Paris when she was quite a child. What—are you off, Desborough ? '

' I must. I've to be up at five. Good night, Colonel. Good night, everybody.'

' If I may I will come with you,' Dare said hastily, rising to his feet, and with a bow that included the whole room he followed Desborough who had just enough recollection of what was due, to stand aside for him at the door. Whereupon Dare caught hold of his arm none too gently.

‘ Jim—you are ungenerous to insist on what I have asked you to forget. To you I am Léon Dare——’

‘ Sorry, old man,’ Desborough was quick enough to take him at his word. ‘ I forgot. And I am worried.’

‘ I knew that. Is it about this possible trouble ? ’

‘ Yes. Partially. What ! You here, Lehr Khan ? ’ for beside them in the gloom rose the tall figure of the Pathan. ‘ What is it ? ’

‘ Sahib, I ask pardon for thus interrupting, but Guggoo has sent me with a message . . . if the Presence desires I will willingly—most willingly—choke his messages down his throat. Yet he insisted, and he is a strange man. The message, Sahib, is but short—and senseless as the sender : “ The word is given.” ’

Desborough put his foot into the stirrup and swung into the saddle.

‘ Where is Guggoo ? ’ he asked, and Lehr Khan shook his head.

‘ He appeared even as a spirit and before I could answer, faded away into the darkness. Is it my Sahib’s wish that I go in search ? ’

‘ Not now. Lie close within thine house to-night, Lehr Khan. There is evil abroad.’

Lehr Khan salaamed profoundly, and moved away from the bridle.

‘ I hear, my Sahib.’

The mile to the works was covered in silence with only the continuous play of lightning in the south and east to relieve the breathless darkness.

At the camp all was as usual and Hayward looked

up as they entered from the mass of papers before him.

'Hullo, Desborough! you all right? You look knocked out!'

'Nonsense. I'm fit as ever. Get off to bed, there's a good fella. You have been working since dawn yourself.'

Only too glad to obey, Hayward shuffled his papers together, stifled a yawn and with a nod to both men, went off to his little oven of a room, and Dare immediately spoke.

'Jim, you will make use of me if this trouble arises?'

Desborough looked at him.

'If I could I gladly would. But—Léon—if you wish me to forget, others will not. Your identity cannot always be hidden.'

'It has been hidden for two years. Leave that to me. I am not wanted for the throne. . . . I am a menace to it. My father will scheme to place me there and that means a disruption in the country. Trouble for Anne, ruin for us. Princes are best out of the way if they are not heirs to the throne, Jim. They are by reason of their position largely compelled to idleness—and I for one am tired of idleness. I am not an engineer so I cannot be of practical help to you in your work, but I am a soldier, I have fought for nearly four years and in that I may be of service to you.'

Desborough walked over to a further table, picked up another briar and stuffed it with meticulous care. When he spoke his voice was dry.

'May I ask you a very odd question?'

‘ You may.’

‘ Then what is your reason behind all this ? It cannot be merely your desire to keep away from Alania.’

For a moment Dare did not reply ; then he answered almost as curtly as Desborough had inquired.

‘ That is true, but I am sorry I cannot answer your question.’

‘ Cannot ? ’

‘ Will not, if you prefer the literal truth.’

‘ Then ’—Desborough threw down the match and stamped on it—‘ I cannot accept the responsibility of your services.’

There was a tense silence broken not by speech from either of the two but by the distant sound of a rifle-shot followed by another and another, and then by a far-off volley that echoed and re-echoed from the hills.

Almost before Dare realized what had happened Desborough had sprung to the outer door and Hayward, eyes blinking, half-stupefied by sleep, stumbled into the room.

‘ It’s come, then ! I say, Desborough—wait for me ! ’

He plunged back into his room, to hustle on his clothes, and from the camp came a long wail of fear and confusion as Desborough, thrusting his revolver into his pocket, shouted for Lehr Khan, who appeared before his name had left his master’s lips.

‘ Sahib— ? ’

Desborough confronted a man whose grave face was alight with excitement, whose dark inscrutable eyes

blazed with delight ; he issued a brief order and a couple of minutes later the big gong boomed out its orders to the scuffling jabbering crowd.

Meanwhile to Dare came the sudden thought of the sick engineer lying alone seven miles away ; with him to think was to act and with one quick movement he was at the telephone and before Hayward, half-dressed at the door, could ask any question, he was speaking.

‘ That is Mrs. Steevens ? There is trouble here. Are you safe at present ? ’

Hayward could only guess the reply, but after a second Dare spoke again.

‘ Do not fear. Help will come to you at once. Yes. I talked to you this afternoon.’

A moment afterwards he put down the instrument.

‘ There is firing all round them and bonfires to be seen at various points. Her husband is too weak to get up, but he asks for some soldiers. There has already been an attack on the head works. The two night watchmen shot and there seem to be men prowling about the sluices. I give you her words.’

‘ Good Lord ! is that what they’re after ? Here—get out of the way—where’s Desborough ? ’

Struggling into a coat he pushed by Dare, shouting out for his chief, but Desborough was not to be found, and he hurried out into the darkness leaving Dare alone.

Two minutes later the sound of bugles rang out from the Fort, followed by more firing, this time much nearer, and Dare went into his room, took from his

suit-case a revolver, loaded it and laying it on the table hurriedly began to change out of his dinner clothes into riding breeches and a khaki drill tunic. Just as he was dressed Desborough re-entered.

'Hullo—you've got your wish. The tribes are attacking in force and there's signs that it's more than a tribal rising.'

He snatched up the telephone as he was speaking, but Dare stopped him.

'I rang up Steevens,' he said and repeated what he knew. 'Shall I go over, Jim?'

'Good man. Get to the Fort and report to Colonel Hewitt as quickly as you can. Good luck, Léon. There's your horse ready.'

He met Léon's eyes. There was a smile, a quick hand grip and Léon was off.

Chapter XVIII

‘**W**HAT’S the time?’

Léon Dare, grimy and unshorn, came across the room and bent down over the speaker.

‘Three o’clock,’ he said. ‘Can I get anything for you?’

Steevens lifted weary eyelids and met Léon’s dark eyes speaking with some difficulty through lips parched and dried with fever.

‘No, sir . . . thank you. Anything . . . new?’

‘Not yet.’

Léon took up a tin mug from the floor and held it to the sick man’s mouth, slipping his arm round the wasted shoulders and holding him gently as a woman.

‘Things will come right.’

‘My wife?’

‘Behaving nobly. There has been no attack on the sluices these last two hours.’

Steevens swallowed a mouthful of the tepid water and sank back again; his fine physique was cruelly wasted, his cheeks and temples hollow, his eyes bright, his breathing shallow and rapid. Léon, no stranger to Death in many forms, felt little hope, but none would have guessed it from his attitude or words.

‘I will send Mary to you,’ he said, laying him gently back on the rough sacking that was all he had for bed. ‘Try to sleep and keep up your heart.’

He went out of the tiny dungeon-like place into the narrow passage lit only by slits fifteen feet up in the walls, at the end were ten steps built steeply in the thickness of the wall, which led into a square stone room loop-holed on all four sides and having no exit save by the way he had come. The place was stifling with heat, and foul with the smell of blood and stale air. On the floor in a pool of blood lay a boy in uniform, doubled up and moaning faintly; at the loop-holes stood red-eyed, hollow-cheeked men rifle to shoulder, and in another corner one man sat up against the wall loading rifles passed to him by thirteen-year old Bobby Steevens, a bandage drenched in blood about one of his legs, his hands shaking with fever yet still capable to do the task that must be done; and every now and again a bullet would whizz through a loophole and flatten itself against the opposite wall.

Léon looked round, went to the moaning lad and knelt for a minute or two beside him. He had been shot in the stomach the night before and for the last six hours had begged in vain for the water that was not to be had; now he had relapsed into semi-unconsciousness which would soon pass into merciful coma and death. Realizing nothing could be done, Léon left him and went over to the sergeant in command—an old Reservist, called up for the European war, and now drafted to India and the Frontier Force. He

saluted with the smartness of the long service man and stepped a foot back from his loophole to be out of reach of those deadly bullets.

‘No further attack, sir. They’ll wait till night. If some one could get through they ought to try again soon after nightfall. There is a moon at twelve or thereabouts.’

‘You mean we can’t hold out much longer?’

‘Not more than another day. The last water ration has been served out and the men can’t eat food if they’ve no drink—even if the food was to be had. They’ve done their best, but they’re played out.’

‘Very well. I shall start about seven.’

‘You, sir?’

‘Who else?’

‘But, sir—excuse me—you’ve no need to sacrifice yourself——’

‘I start at seven . . . and I want a native dress, so I shall try to borrow that of the gentleman lying on the slope between here and the angle of the weir. So do not let the men get jumpy and fire on me by mistake. I shall crawl out directly it is dusk.’

The life-long habit of obedience to a superior officer—Dare might not be an Englishman, but he had won distinction on the battle fields of France and had commanded men in many a desperate affray—held. Macnaughten saluted and stepped back to his place, lifting his rifle with hands that shook a little with the weight; strong man as he was, slow starvation and what was infinitely worse, the dreadful suffering from

thirst, was playing havoc in the block-house. Men had died from their wounds and their comrades crept out in the darkness and buried them not knowing whether they would be knifed or shot as they dug the shallow grave, men moaned and raved with thirst, and out of the little garrison of twenty-five men sent out by Hewitt to defend the regulator, only six remained alive, and one of those, one the man who loaded the rifles had had his foot shot away and was in hourly danger of gangrene, and another was the young boy who lay dying on the floor. Among them, the leader of more than one desperate little sortie when the attack on the sluices threatened to materialize and the unanimously appointed head of the tiny garrison was Prince Léon of Alania, known to his companions as Mister Dare—and few names could have suited him better, for even Sergeant Macnaughten of the South African and European wars, admitted he ‘was the coolest hand he’d ever seen.’

The attack on the great weir was now a fortnight old and showed no signs of coming to an end. Colonel Hewitt, in any other case but this, would have been perfectly right in considering the weir as a place not likely to be attacked. There was nothing to be gained and everything to be lost, while a little farther on was the possibility of rich plunder; therefore he had despatched a handful of men to protect the engineer and his family and prepared to meet the brunt of the trouble at Fort Amrah.

Léon Dare had asked to accompany the little force,

and receiving permission had departed thither, the telephone was cut by the raiders the night after he arrived and no more news coming through, Hewitt left them to it and hoped for the best. He would gladly have sent relief if he could, but Fort Amrah was hard pressed and he could not spare a single man. The blaze was all along the Punjaub Frontier, west and north, troops were being rushed up from Delhi and Bengal, but Peshawur had the first call and the floods delayed the reliefs getting to the more outlying positions. Short of food and with a daily increasing sick list apart from the wounded, Hewitt held Fort Amrah and the camp, getting more and more anxious as the days went by and more and more grimly determined to hold on. Desborough was at the camp which was organized for defence roughly but fairly effectually, and there was no means of finding out what was progressing at the canal's head. To make matters still worse, Guggoo had utterly disappeared and Desborough was left wondering whether by any chance this attack had anything to do with His Highness Prince Gulab Singh or whether he himself was a fool for even considering such a thing. Guggoo had warned him certainly and more than once he had passed the warning on to Colonel Hewitt, but how could Guggoo's warning conceivably have anything to do with that twenty odd years old feud and the vengeance that Gulab Singh had never forgotten.

He pondered over it when he could, but there was time for little but fighting, watching and snatching a

few hours' rest ; his chief anxiety was for Léon though he did not for an instant suspect how hardly the tiny garrison at the weir was being pressed.

Then one night a prisoner was brought into the camp by Lehr Khan, a miserable whining Khasmiri, only too willing to save his skin by telling anything he knew, and Desborough had him up to learn all he could. It seemed he had been first with the attacking party at the weir, and had only this last day or two been drafted down to join the attack on Fort Amrah.

A few sharp questions and he told all he knew, and Desborough learned the startling fact that mingling with the Afghan forces were some Wajiris and Kushru Khels under special orders to take the weir and hold it. They were under the command of a Sikkimese and were in no way to join in the big fighting on the British forts. Their orders were to destroy the blockhouses, take the weir and opening the sluice gates let the whole force of the flood career along the canal-bed to Fort Amrah and the nearly completed bridge. Directly this was done they were to retire from the whole business and double back to the Hills—their work done.

Desborough sat very still, thinking over what he had heard, and quite oblivious to the wretched captive's wails ; the whole plan was suddenly clear to him and only too well did he discern Gulab Singh's hand in the matter. Should the water, now at high flood, be let in through widely opened sluices at the head, it would reach the camp in a few minutes and not only destroy the bridge and probably the embankments,

but would in its full strength swamp the entire camp and wreck both his work and his reputation for ever. Stunned for the moment by the magnitude of Gulab Singh's revenge, Desborough stared unseeingly before him, unable even to formulate a plan of defence. It was a fortnight now since Léon Dare and the gallant little force had gone to the blockhouse rather as a precautionary measure than anything else, and what state they must be in now would not bear thinking about. . . even now Léon might be lying dead, murdered for the sake of a private vengeance with which he had nothing to do.

A louder wail from the prisoner roused him to the necessity for action ; with a curt order to the two troopers, he rose and went off to his hut, shouting for Hayward. The latter came, binding up his left wrist as well as he could with a dirty strip of rag, one end of which he held in his teeth, and stared at Desborough's white face.

‘What's up ? News ?’

‘Yes—of a kind. A prisoner has been brought in and says there's a deliberate attack on the weir. I must get news to Hewitt somehow or other and I shall try and get to the Fort after dark.’

‘It's madness.’

‘Possibly. But think what must be happening at the weir. God knows whether they're alive or dead.’

But Desborough's plan came to nothing for at six o'clock the long-expected relief marched in from Peshawur and the tribesmen after one desperate attempt to

stand on the Peshawur-Amrah road, turned tail and fled, and Desborough, leaving the camp for the first time since the outbreak of hostilities, galloped over to the Fort and made his way to Colonel Hewitt's presence.

The officer in command of the relieving force was oddly enough an uncle of Hugh Westringham's whom Desborough knew, and he, Colonel Hewitt, Rowe and one or two other officers were gathered in the clubhouse which did duty for mess discussing the details of the action that was immediately necessary.

Desborough made short work of preliminaries in demanding a few minutes alone with the Brigadier who was not best pleased at the way Desborough forced himself into his presence; but five minutes later he was listening attentively, if incredulously, to the warning which Desborough was repeating.

An hour later a flying column with a couple of guns were ready to set out for the head of the canal, when suddenly on the outskirts of the cantonment a couple of rifle-shots rang out and three minutes later two soldiers appeared dragging a native prisoner between them; his arms bound behind his back.

The moon had risen and the countryside was almost as light as day; Desborough, just about to ride off with the column, glanced carelessly at the prisoner who seemed half-fainting, looked again and then flung himself from the saddle speaking to the officer in command, Major Simpson.

'One moment—wait—here! Bring him here!'

The two Tommies held their prisoner by his bound arms and Desborough coming close looked into his face, pushed aside the dirty turban and uttered a cry as the heavy lids lifted.

‘Dare! Simpson, come a moment here! Let him go!’

The bewildered men let go the prisoner’s arms and he would have collapsed had not Desborough caught him and held him up.

A little crowd collected, Rowe, Colonel Hewitt, and after a minute or two the Brigadier himself; and Desborough carrying in his burden laid it down on a wicker chaise-longue inside the club.

‘Is he hurt?’ Hewitt said anxiously, and Kirkland, summoned from the bungalow they were turning into a hospital, ran over him with careful fingers.

A bullet from a sentry’s rifle had pierced the upper part of the left arm, but the wound was a flesh one and the bone untouched: the heart was feeble and he was pitifully thin, but some brandy was forced down his throat and after a minute or two he revived enough to gasp out his story.

Fifteen minutes later, the flying column increased by a light battery clattered away from the station, and Dare, lifted by half a dozen willing hands, was carried off to Rowe’s bungalow.

In twelve hours he had recovered enough to eat a good meal, and in twenty-four after a bath and a shave felt almost himself again, despite the strain and suffering of the last fortnight, for he possessed a

marvellous power of resistance, and although his arm was helpless in a sling and he was gaunt with hunger, he was quite ready for any further happening.

His story to Desborough was brief but vivid, but of his own part in the relief he refused to speak.

‘I just crawled out and robbed a dead man of his clothes,’ he said, ‘and then made my way here.’

‘You know what you risked if they’d caught you?’

‘Every one has to risk something,’ Dare said indifferently. ‘I think the weir has received no damage. Is the bridge all right?’

A day or two later when matters were reverting to the normal and he was once more with Desborough in the camp, he asked a sudden question:

‘Is Miss Desborough coming out for the opening of the canal, Jim?’

Desborough looked at him quickly; they were riding back from an inspection of a weir a mile or two away and Dare had been particularly silent.

‘Yes,’ he said after a moment’s pause, ‘I believe so. She wishes to come.’

‘Does she know I am here?’

‘I told her in my last letter.’

Dare’s dark brows drew together in a little frown, but he did not pursue the subject further, and they exchanged no further conversation till they reached home.

That night however, despite his apparent indifference, was a bad one for Léon; he could not sleep and

lay staring into the dimness of his room listening to the howl of the jackals outside and panting a little in the dreadful heat. He did not want to think of Nadia but he could not help it. Her personality was an obsession and his pride called to him in vain. He hated her for her treatment of him yet he craved her presence, he wanted to humiliate her as she had humiliated him, to make her suffer as he had suffered, yet all the time desire made physical existence a torment, and memory a scourge to whip his quivering nerves anew. Thinking afresh of that last meeting he writhed helplessly, biting on his clenched hands, despising himself for his weakness yet powerless to fight it.

He had not realized till lately how much the thought of Nadia affected him. When he had first met her in New York he had been attracted by her looks, then charmed by her personality; the touch of aloofness in all she said and did pleased him after the freedom of the average woman he met, and used as he had been all his life to the dignity and ceremony that surrounds such a position as his, Nadia's manner was a welcome relief. He had paid her much attention in New York, had intended to follow her immediately to England; then had come his unfortunate accident, and, when he finally arrived, her unexpected reception. Such treatment he had never received before, and consequently his vanity was injured; but alongside that injury was something very different and even more unexpected. Pain—not of pride but of heart, seized him and made him suffer. Her indifference began to

make him afraid, to hurt him, to arouse deep emotion within him, making the ordinary occupations and interests of life utterly worthless.

He intended to break down the barrier between them, to conquer her apparent dislike, to make her listen to what he wanted to say ; then came that meeting at the Carlton—the words that cut through pride and composure alike and seared his very heart, and in the heat of pain and misery and thwarted passion, he swore he would not see her again. His decision to go with Desborough had been made after a night of misery, and he did not regret it, but the complete severance that decision made, between his old life and the new, stabbed his soul awake and made him realize fully the thing that had happened.

Until these last few weeks, the interest and novelty of the life he was leading had sufficed to keep personal thought at bay, but now, weakened as he was although he would not admit it, by the terrible time through which he had passed, he could not longer erect a rampart between himself and truth.

He knew now that unless he could make Nadia Desborough his wife, he would never know real happiness ; he might marry—his position might force such a step, distasteful though it was—but he would never again love. He longed ceaselessly to see Nadia again but he dreaded such a meeting as much as he desired it ; she had hurt him very deeply and he suffered still, but she would probably hurt him again and very naturally he shrank from that hurt, yet until he had

asked her to marry him he would find no peace.

He realized too that he needed her not only as a lover but as a companion, that with her by his side he might do his duty to his country, while without her he would do nothing but carve out his own life in some place he should choose ; if he could make Nadia love him, then life would be a great and glorious opportunity, but if not—then his youth was over, the promise of his manhood unfulfilled, his better self stifled and left to die.

If things went as they were expected to do, he might expect to see her in a couple of months and then he would put his fate to the test, but in the meantime he wanted her, wanted her desperately, longed for her presence, the sound of her voice, the look in her eyes as he had seen it in those days in New York.

Chapter XIX

MARIE KIRKLAND returned to India just before Christmas, and one evening Desborough was just about to start on his way from the camp to the Kirklands' bungalow, where with Léon, he had been bidden to dine, when the mails arrived. Seeing one in Nadia's handwriting he slipped it into his pocket and rode off with Léon, talking as they went of the plans that were being made for the canal's opening. It was to be something of a ceremony, the Governor of the Punjaub, Sir George Miller, was to be present, various officials military and civil would accompany him, there would be many visitors to Fort Amrah and much blowing of trumpets. Desborough, in no mood for jubilation of any kind, would have been glad to get the next month over, but as there is no way of getting over anything in this life except by going through it, he had to hide his feelings and face the ceremonies and the crowds as though both were to his liking.

He had not yet seen Marie since her return and as Léon and he entered the Kirklands' drawing-room the

thought of how much had passed since he was last there passed swiftly through his mind.

The room was bare as nearly all Indian rooms are with their hint of the temporary, as opposed to the settled, home, but there were flowers, a photograph or two and some books and bright cushions that hid the worst of the shabbiness and severity of the room.

As the servant showed them in Marie rose hastily from her chair and coming forward held out both her hands, the colour deepening in her face, her eyes shining like stars.

‘ Jim—oh, Jim ! ’ she said and could say no more.

Desborough could not ignore the sweet welcome in her face ; taking her hands in his he raised them to his lips, hesitated a second, then bent down and kissed her cheek.

‘ Marie dear, welcome back ! We’ve missed you beyond words.’

She gripped his fingers tightly for a moment, smiled rather unsteadily, then turned to Léon.

‘ Mr. Dare ? ’ she questioned, ‘ my husband has spoken of you. I am so glad you were able to come to-night.’

‘ I am more glad to come,’ he said and bowed low over her hand, ‘ if Jim is a friend of yours, then please allow me to become your friend also.’

She laughed, making some trivial reply, and after a moment or two Kirkland came in accompanied by Toby Presscott, Rowe and Major Fuller, the senior major at Fort Amrah.

Dinner was announced at once, and Rowe proposed Marie's health and they drank it standing with a heartiness that was unmistakably sincere, which unexpected little ceremony surprised Kirkland and sent a flaming colour into Marie's cheeks.

Later came the inevitable talk of the canal, and Marie leaned across to speak to Desborough.

'Jim—Nadia is sailing on the Malagra. Did you know it? She told me she should write to you as usual the day before and let you know nothing till after she had sailed.'

Léon's lips tightened; even the mention of Nadia's name disturbed him, so strong upon him was her influence; looking up he saw Desborough's brow lift.

'Oho! is that what she is planning? Hear that, you fellows! Never, never be guardian to a girl-child. They grow up and bully you.'

Marie laughed joyfully: Nadia had fulfilled Jim's wishes and done much to make the remainder of her visit home a happy one, and the thought of her arrival in India filled her with delight.

'That isn't all,' she said. 'Nadia is to travel in very distinguished company.'

'Indeed? Who may that be?'

'No less a person than Princess Anne of Alania——'

'Princess Anne!' Desborough's voice rang out sharply; half rising from the table he stared across at Marie, every atom of colour draining out of his face; Léon turned to his hostess laid his hand on her arm.

'Princess Anne of Alania!' he cried. 'My dear

Mrs. Kirkland—forgive me—but you cannot possibly be right.’

Amazed at the way her remark had been received Marie looked from one to the other, and the rest of the little company, aware that something unexpected was afoot, ceased their conversation as if by mutual consent.

It was Dare who, after one look at his friend’s face, spoke first, aware that he must give some reason for his own agitation, if not for Jim’s.

‘Mrs. Kirkland—are you sure?’

‘Quite sure,’ Marie said definitely. ‘Why are you both so surprised? Jim, you look as though you had seen a ghost.’

Desborough made some vague reply wholly incoherent and dropped back into his chair again, biting his lips; and Léon watching him saw his fingers clench, till the blood fled, on the edge of the table, and the sweat wet on his forehead. He was evidently quite unaware of his friend’s scrutiny, and suddenly Léon looked away and began to talk rapidly.

‘It is astounding,’ he said. ‘I understood—every one understood—that owing to the King of Alania’s precarious state of health, Princess Anne would remain in or near Prégatz. I have not seen a paper. Is His Majesty better?’

‘It is believed he will live several months,’ Marie answered. ‘The papers said very little, but Nadia told me that she had met the Princess in Paris at the house of some friends of Sir Francis Gaunt’s. She went

over for a month with Lady Gaunt and Miss Gaunt to get Miss Gaunt's trousseau, and when she came back, which was a few days only before I sailed, she told me all about it. The Princess apparently was exceedingly charming and kind to her and asked her to luncheon ; it was after several meetings that she learned of Nadia's proposed journey and then she told her she intended to visit India and asked Nadia to travel with her.'

'When ?'

'In time for the opening of the canal. The Princess told Nadia that you, Jim, were a friend of hers, and learning from Nadia of your work and what was so soon to happen, she decided to come up here just for the opening ceremony. Why, Mr. Dare ? Oh, just to give her an idea of the North I think. You know that Miss Desborough is very interested in all that pertains to the Punjaub, and I expect she drew a very fascinating picture of Frontier life. Of course she accepted and it was definitely fixed up. I did not know you knew Princess Anne of Alania, Jim.'

She looked directly at him and her tone required an answer. Desborough passed his tongue over his dry lips and bent his head in slow assent.

'Yes,' he said after a moment. . . . 'I know her.'

His voice was thick and a little hoarse ; Léon saw the remoteness in his eyes, and had Desborough looked up at that moment, he would have seen that his secret was known ; but he did not look and Léon began talking again.

‘Your news is certainly amazing and I must ask your pardon for disbelieving it at first. You see I, in common with every one else, thought the King actually at the point of death. I am glad it is not so. And now—do tell me something else—is Miss Desborough to stay with you or what will she do?’

‘She says she will stay where Jim is and nowhere else,’ Marie laughed. ‘Do you hear that, Jim?’

Desborough started, his eyes suddenly focussing as a man’s eyes will, when he is brought violently back from deep and remote thought, to his present surroundings.

‘What? What did you say?—I beg your pardon, Marie—I did not hear.’

‘Didn’t hear? I should think not. Were you dreaming of the beautiful Princess? For she is very beautiful, is she not, Mr. Dare?’

‘Yes,’ Léon said and fixed his eyes once more on Desborough. ‘She is very beautiful!’

Desborough drew a quick unsteady breath; he felt that he could not endure much more, that if he were not left alone to realize what he had heard he should completely lose his self-control and either disgrace himself by fainting or else violently command Marie to be silent.

It was Kirkland who unconsciously came to his rescue.

‘Look here, Marie, take Mr. Dare into the drawing-room. I’ve some business to talk over with Jim for a few minutes—that is if you other fellas will excuse me for a short while. We shan’t be any time.’

‘Why of course. After you, Rowe.’

They went away with Marie and when they were alone Kirkland leant his arms on the table and looked across at his companion.

‘Desborough, d’you know anything about that old monkey-man of yours—Guggoo, isn’t his name? I mean beyond the ordinary working knowledge.’

Desborough, aroused to the necessity of self-defence, now he was alone, forced himself to pay attention.

‘No,’ he said, ‘except that he is the best workman I’ve ever had, and also that he has a considerable knowledge of affairs farther afield than Fort Amrah!’

‘You’ve no suspicions regarding his trustworthiness?’

‘None. Why?’

‘Because I saw a queer thing yesterday and I intend you to know of it. Guggoo mysteriously disappeared on the night of the flare-up, didn’t he? Well, listen. Yesterday afternoon I had to ride out to Jaudalla—don’t suppose you know it, it’s only a tiny place—to inspect a reported case of plague. Well, it was getting a bit late as I came back and I took a short cut, and my mare took upon herself to go dead lame, so off I had to get and see what was the matter. She picked up a stone and got it wedged so tightly I couldn’t get it out even with my pick so there was nothing for it but to lead her. The path climbs where I was, round a low hill-shoulder, and as I got to the last turn I glanced over the rocks to the left and saw fifty feet

or so below in a little cup of the hills your monkey-man talking to two beauties on horseback—and damn good horses they were too!—apparently layin' down the law and they were listening to him as quietly as though he were some one in authority. I whipped off my coat and wrapped it round Queenie's nose in case she should wind the horses and kick up a row, and then I tethered her to a point of rock out of sight, and hid where I could watch 'em. Now after a bit old Guggoo grew very emphatic and thumped his fist on a rock and rapped out his words like the devil. I'd have given the world to hear what he said—and those two fellas listened and nodded, meek as butter. They were Pathans of some sort, one had got his beard dyed scarlet and they were well-dressed and well-armed. I waited till I saw 'em both salaam to that half-clad ragged old devil as if he were a prince, and ride off by a narrow path into the hills. Then I judged it was not exactly a healthy spot and I got away as quickly as I could. Now what d'you make of that?'

Desborough had listened with the closest attention, and as he did so that curious feeling of something half-remembered, half-forgotten in the remote past, such as he had felt when he had spoken last with Guggoo, came back to him. He strove to grasp it but in vain, and at Kirkland's last words he shook his head.

'Frankly I don't know,' he said. 'It's got an odd look. You say the men were strangers and well mounted?'

'Magnificently mounted.'

'H'm. Well—thanks for telling me. I shall keep a sharp look-out and you'd better do the same.'

'Yes, of course. Well you'll soon be quit of Guggoo and all your other troubles connected with this part of the world. Are you as glad to get away as I should be I wonder?'

'Oh—for some things. But I like the Punjaubis and it's been quite a good four years. I'm glad to see Marie back. She looks much better.'

'She's well enough,' Kirkland said indifferently. 'It's no worse out here for her than for any one else. Well, shall we join the others?'

They went into the drawing-room to find Marie at the piano, singing in her light, sweet little soprano Mozart's *Wiegenlied*, and Léon watching with brooding eyes. She flushed a little as her husband entered but finished the last verse, and before any of her listeners could thank her he spoke:

'Why in the world do you always try to sing songs too difficult for you?' he demanded. 'Funny creatures women are.'

Desborough made a movement as though to speak hotly but checked himself, and Marie, all the colour gone now from her face, gave him his answer quite quietly.

'Mr. Rowe asked for that song,' she said, and began to talk to her nearest neighbour, Toby Presscott, without taking any further heed of the matter.

Rowe, a kindly but rather dull man, turned to Léon and muttered beneath his breath something about

‘hound,’ and the talk became more general and pronouncedly ‘shop.’

‘Nobody cares for irrigation except at a time like this!’ Hayward remarked presently, à propos of some chance word of Presscott’s—he had arrived a few minutes before. ‘It’s about one of the most important things British rule has done for India and it’s practically outside public knowledge altogether. Isn’t that so, Desborough?’

Desborough, lounging in a low chair and pretending to look at an elderly *Sphere*, nodded.

‘That’s so, Hayward. What of it?’

‘Just that it’s a damned shame—beg pardon, Marie—but it’s true. Everybody can see the roads and the railways and they’re all willin’ to say “How wonderful!” and “How great a benefit!” and all the rest of the twaddle, but as for water—bless you they know nothing about it—yet it’s the life-blood of the country.’

‘They do not appeal to popular imagination, I suppose,’ Léon said, playing meditatively with the fringed end of Marie’s long girdle. ‘It is a pity. I think it most absorbing and romantic. You make a canal and the desert blossoms. Why do you not teach people how important irrigation is?’

‘Thanks! I’ve no desire to teach anybody anything!’ Hayward retorted. ‘Quite enough to do lookin’ after my own job.’

‘It’s a beastly shame, and you’re damn-well hard used, old bird,’ Presscott remarked by way of joining

in the conversation. 'We know what heroes you are, you engineers. Bless you yes, we don't forget. Locks, spill-ways, sluices, concrete-beds—shouldn't like one myself—escape-weirs, bridges—we know! Cheerio, you belly-acher!'

'Toby!' Marie's voice was plaintive. 'What an unnecessary calling of a spade being a spade! If he is—what you say, you might use another word.'

'Nothin' else half so expressive! And he certainly is. He belly-aches all over the shop—listen to him with his old canals that nobody loves! He'd weep over himself for two pins. No you don't, my fine fella, not if *I* can help it!'

Hayward had picked up a soda-water syphon and was advancing upon Presscott in a threatening manner, and Léon created a diversion by handing across a ridiculous outline sketch of Hayward walking about with his hands folded tightly over his belt, and an expression of acute misery on his face. Underneath was written: 'The B—A—' in large capitals.

'It's all very well for you to talk, my lad!' Hayward retorted; 'you are here for fun and fun only and it doesn't matter to you whether any one appreciates your supreme genius and all its works or not. You can walk off quite happily and forget all about it if the blinking bridge is carried away by the first big flood or any damn Afghan smashes up the weir.'

Léon looked across at Desborough.

'Do you hear your colleague's cheerful prophecies, Jim?' he inquired. 'May I reward him suitably?'

It was still so new to Léon, this friendly badinage, silly stuff as it was, as to delight him ; as he had said to Desborough these last six years had taught him more than all the rest of his life. At twenty-six he had had practically no experience of the world save as a place where life was ceremonious, proscribed, wearying with its etiquette and formal duties ; then the great war had come upon the world and he had gone with his regiment to live in water-logged trenches or lie out under scorching suns. He had hungered and thirsted, suffered and fought, with his men, for four years and he had come back to a world stunned with the crash and roar of battle, a new man with a burning desire to be worthy of the life that had been given back to him.

With Desborough in this hard Frontier life he experienced what even the war had not given him—the close companionship of men of whom he could make friends, who accepted him solely on his face value and not on any accident of rank, who treated him as one of themselves and admitted him to their joys and their grumbles. He had almost forgotten the world he must one day go back to till to-night, when Marie Kirkland had announced her astounding news ; and with his astonishment had come a sudden overwhelming knowledge that filled him with consternation. He remembered every word of that interview he had had with his cousin Anne ; they had been close friends always, more like brother and sister, and she had told him something of what had happened to her. He

had never connected the unknown lover with this man whom he himself loved ; yet knowing Desborough as well as he now did, he was not surprised. He was not sorry when the evening was ended and they could ride home through the moonlight, talking of nothing in particular because Hayward was with them.

Léon had gone to bed an hour later and was half asleep when a knock roused him and Desborough entered speaking softly.

‘ Léon—are you awake ? ’

‘ Yes,’ Léon roused himself on his elbow and saw by the moonlight that Desborough was still dressed. ‘ Sit down, Jim. Are you all right ? ’

‘ Quite. But I’ve something to ask you and I beg you not to ask me any questions. I am sorry to disturb you now, but I’d no chance before you turned in. May I smoke ? ’

‘ Of course. Throw me a cigarette too.’

Desborough passed cigarettes and matches over, filled and lit his pipe and smoked steadily for a few minutes, then spoke abruptly.

‘ Léon—I want you to cable to your cousin—to the Princess. She mustn’t come here with Nadia. Do you understand ? She mustn’t come.’

Léon tried to see his face but he stood in the shadow.

‘ Yes,’ he said. ‘ But you cannot stop her coming to India. She must have sailed.’

‘ I know. But that’s different. It’s here she

mustn't come. You must stop her—you must—she can't come——'

He broke off, stood for a moment rigidly still, then turned on his heel and went out of the room closing the door behind him.

Chapter XX

‘ **O**H, Jim! How good to be with you again! And so this is Fort Amrah!’

Nadia, her hands tightly locked in Desborough’s, stood in Marie Kirkland’s drawing-room just a month later and Desborough, resting his tired eyes on hers, felt that life still had something left for him in the love of this daughter of his.

‘ Yes, this is Fort Amrah ; d’you think you can be happy here, Nadia, till the business is finished?’

‘ Anywhere with you, Jim—only I don’t wish to stay even with Marie when you are a mile away.’

‘ My dear,’ he drew her to a seat and spoke quickly, ‘ you can’t come to the camp. I’ve no room in my bungalow—there are three of us there already, and it would be out of the question to have a woman out there unless you could have a bungalow beside mine and a servant.’

‘ Would it? But, Jim, I’d be quite safe, and I should like roughing it!’

‘ It isn’t that, dear—it’s merely unromantic practical details like—sanitation, and that sort of thing. There’s

no sort of arrangement of any kind except for the men.'

She nodded.

'I understand. Well, promise me this! Let me be with you at your work as much as you can. How long will the whole thing be? Isn't the canal to be formally opened to-morrow?'

'Yes. But there's more to it than that. We shall have to watch the arches for subsidence for a day or two and the bed for leakage. I shan't get away under a fortnight.'

'I see. But, Jim . . . you said there were three of you?'

'Yes. Hayward, Léon Dare and myself.'

'Léon Dare?' Nadia's voice was suddenly very still. 'Is he here?'

'Yes. I thought you knew it. He is staying till the show's over.'

Nadia made no further comment for the moment but sat very still. She had heard no word from, or about, Dare since that fateful luncheon, and she was utterly taken aback to learn he was with her guardian, and Desborough, longing to question her about Anne, yet fighting against his desires, made his explanation.

'Léon came to see me the night before I sailed and asked me to let him come out with me and see the work,' he said. 'He asked me not to mention him to you. He seemed very upset about something. Do you know why?'

Yes,' Nadia's answer was brief, and he went on:

‘He was not over well—his long illness in New York had left him none too strong, but the voyage put him right. Since then he has been with me . . . and has done very fine service to us all.’

He would have said more but Nadia stopped him.

‘His illness in New York?’ she said. ‘What d’you mean, Jim?’

She sat very still during the explanation digesting the news and the knowledge of her own behaviour as best she could; when it was ended and Desborough had told of the siege at the head weir and Léon’s journey to Fort Amrah to save his fellows, she was very white.

‘Jim,’ she said and clenched her hands together. ‘I’ve behaved atrociously—I’ve been unjust—I want to see Mr. Dare as soon as I can.’

Desborough looked at her.

‘I’ll tell him,’ he said. ‘And he has something to say to you—at least he should say it, and if he does not, I must. It’s not exactly personal but it’s something you should know, if you are to become friends.’

She nodded, impatient now of everything that kept her from doing what she conceived to be her duty, and Desborough saw her impatience and drove back his own heart-ache with a little sigh. Rising he went to the door.

‘I’ll find Dare for you,’ he said. ‘And I shall see you presently, dear, at dinner.’

He was just going out, when Nadia’s heart smote her; acting on impulse she called after him.

‘Jim! Jim, come back. I want you.’

‘I thought you wanted to see Dare?’ he said, standing with the door handle in his hand. ‘I can find him.’

‘Presently. Mr. Dare has disliked me—and with cause—for five months, he can wait another hour. Let us talk a little longer, Jim, just us two.’

‘I can find him,’ Desborough repeated and Nadia held out her hand.

‘Jim, how unkind! Come and sit down and talk to me. There is a great deal to hear and repeat.’

She made him sit down beside her on the couch and studying him grew worried over his appearance.

‘You look so tired,’ she said suddenly. ‘Have you been ill and not told me?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘But for once I am tired. It’s been a worrying business. However, it will soon be over now.’

The opening ceremony begins at eleven?’

‘Yes, eleven.’

‘You have a big crowd coming, I suppose?’

‘Yes. Sir George Miller arrived this evening. He’s staying with Rowe—his A.D.C. Captain Selwyn is here and various other visitors are scattered over the place. The usual brass-hats and civil dignitaries—sounds clerical, that—and a lot of fuss. The whole thing is a confounded nuisance. I wish they’d let me get away quietly first and come back afterwards.’

Nadia, leaning back in her chair, studied his face intently; there was something in his manner she did not understand, not the usual sudden withdrawal of

confidence that she was accustomed to and she could not define even to herself quite what it was. He seemed indifferent and weary ; a strange thing for a man whose chief characteristic was his immense vitality.

She decided to find out what it was, wondered if Marie knew and then instantly dismissed the thought ; this was some deep thing of the spirit and it might be that even she herself would not be permitted to discover it.

Once again the desire arose to see Dare and put herself right with him ; she was amazed to find how strong that wish was and how much Dare's opinion meant to her. For the moment she felt nothing else mattered and Desborough seemed to read her thought for once ; again he rose.

' I will find Dare if I can,' he said. ' Good-bye for the present, Nadia. You will be happy here I hope, and I know Marie will look after you.'

' Yes. Please send him to me if you can. When shall I see you alone, Jim, again ? '

' I'll ask Marie to let us have a little time after dinner—Kirkland would let us use his study perhaps. I must hurry back now, for I have to finish some papers and dress.'

He went out of the room and met Marie on the verandah, put his request and then mounted and rode off to the camp, his heart heavy, his interest even in his work at the lowest ebb.

No word of Anne. He did not know where she was or what had happened. Since she had not appeared

with Nadia it might be supposed that Léon had done as he asked, but equally it might not; she might be intending to come up-country at the last moment just before the opening ceremony, and that he felt he could not bear. If she came, his struggle would be over and he would give way to the passion that he had for her—that he knew, and because he loved her with spirit as well as body, he determined that she must not come. He could not ask Léon; since that night he felt a barrier between them, little knowing Léon's knowledge of Anne's heart, and he felt disinclined to demolish it. Very naturally he hated himself for his weakness in letting Léon guess, if not know, his jealously-guarded secret.

Fatigue of mind and body, the strain of the attack on the camp, and the deadly ache of his heart had conspired to weaken him far more than he knew and his vitality was perilously low. It seemed to him that, the canal once opened, nothing very much mattered, and he did not even attempt to make future plans.

Lehr Khan was at the hut when he returned and uttered an exclamation of dismay as he dismounted.

'My Sahib is ill! Permit me to fetch the Presence some remedy.'

He came forward anxiously but Desborough shook his head.

'No, I am not ill, Lehr Khan—only very tired. I have a letter to write and then I must dress. Put my clothes ready.'

The man salaamed and departed, to seek out Léon

who was playing with a small fat brown baby just outside the hut. Lehr Khan saw the baby—who could just toddle—fall over and graze his knee, and was starting forward when Léon swooped down, picked up the mite, kissed the injured limb and taking his watch out held it to the small ear. The charm worked as it does for all babies the world over, and the small thing smiled and gurgled.

A smile broke too over Lehr Khan's stern bearded face and his eyes shone with pride; then pride and smile vanished in a truly fierce frown.

'I ask the Heaven-born's pardon a thousand times! Oh, thou wicked one, how is it thou darest to disturb the Sahib thus? Child of evil that thou art, get hither and trouble not one who is so high above thee—does the knee hurt, dearling?'

Léon picked up the baby—and put him in his father's arms; he had already some fluency in the vernacular and spoke quickly.

'Such a one will grow to uphold thine old age, Lehr Khan—such a baby disturbs no one.'

Lehr Khan salaamed as best he could under the circumstances and stood holding his son.

'If the Sahib could give me one moment of hearing?' he ventured.

Léon saw his troubled eyes.

'I am listening,' he said. 'Speak on.'

'Then—be still, oh son of mine—it is of my Sahib, Desborough Sahib, I would speak. He is not well. I have served him both here and beyond the great waters,

I have lived in his presence, I have given him his food and desired nothing but his good—for seven years have I served him—and now he changes, and his eyes they are the eyes of a man whose heart is broken. Excellency—you are his friend—can you not heal my Sahib of his grief ? ’

Léon fidgetted with the pipe he held and after a moment looked up and met the Pathan’s anxious gaze ; he knew the man was to be trusted and he knew too his devotion to his master.

‘ Lehr Khan,’ he said. ‘ You are right. Desborough Sahib is ill, but it is an illness of the mind and not of the body. I can do little, but that little I will do. Have you yet seen the Mem-Sahib ? ’

‘ Not yet, Excellency. Will she heal or destroy ? ’

‘ I believe she will heal—I do not yet know. Rest assured I will do what I can. You may go.’

The man had hardly left two minutes before Desborough entered.

‘ Ah, you’re here. Léon, my ward wants to see you—before dinner. Are you free to go over a little early ? ’

‘ To see me ? ’ Léon’s voice was amazed. ‘ To see me ? Jim——’

‘ She wishes to explain something. You will go ? ’

‘ But of course. How is she ? Well ? Happy ? ’

‘ She is well and I believe she is happy.’

He paused a moment looking at Léon, then spoke with some difficulty. ‘ You will not destroy that happiness ? ’

‘I? I destroy it? But I would give my life to make it greater! Do you not understand, Jim? Surely you must!’

‘I understand you are Prince Léon of Alania,’ Desborough said very quietly. ‘Between us you have chosen to let your rank stand aside—that was your wish, and I have reaped the benefit of your choice. But between you and my ward the matter is different.’

‘It is different in this way, that I desire to make your ward my wife.’

‘Your wife?’

‘If she will do me that honour——’

Léon dropped the formality that had governed the interview and rose to his feet.

‘Jim—if she will not marry me I shall never know happiness! If she will marry me—if she loves me—I will by God’s help live worthily—more worthily than I have hitherto done. To me there is no other woman in the world—she means everything to me—everything! Will you not help me?’

Desborough, amazed as he was, could not but be touched by Léon’s emotion. That he loved Nadia enough to marry her, he, Jim, had never guessed; he had known them to be friends in America and had been surprised to observe the bitterness with which Nadia regarded him in England. But such a marriage for her had never entered his head. He was startled enough to be silent for a while and suddenly Léon caught his arm.

‘Listen!’ he said and his voice shook. ‘She is all

the world to me—and you know—you know what love is. Anne spoke to me before I left. She did not mention your name—I did not guess till that night at Mrs. Kirkland's. Then I knew. Will you help me because of Anne—for her sake ?'

Desborough's arm set like iron beneath the younger man's fingers, his face was grim, his eyes hard. Beneath his icy exterior a tumult of emotion raged. Léon's agitation was contagious. He began to be afraid. He began to fear his own power of self-control, knowing that with very little more and he would break down altogether despite the other man's presence and sob his heart out.

His throat swelled and behind his eyes the hot dryness began to sting and burn ; wrenching his arm free he went across the room and stood back to Léon fingering some papers ; and behind him, in utter silence, Léon waited. At last he spoke, his voice steady and quite expressionless.

' You have asked me in a way that makes my refusal impossible. I did not guess that you felt this for—for my daughter. She believes herself my ward. Since you have told me this, I must tell you what concerns you in this matter. If you have time I will only keep you ten minutes.'

He turned round and Léon made no reply but sat down, his eyes on Desborough's face ; and Desborough, his hands clenched on the table's edge began to speak.

' As you know, I spent several years in Prégatz

with my wife—my daughter was then about three years old. During that time something occurred . . . I cannot tell even to you the whole truth. But my wife divorced me. All I can say is that she believed to be true something that was not true. When she died, the child went to my wife's brother—Sir Francis Gaunt and was brought up as my ward. Sir Francis and Lady Gaunt know the truth. They have always known it—and the only other person who knows it is—is—her Highness—she—' He paused a moment and Léon still did not speak, then added :

'My daughter does not know. There is no need she ever should. But do you realize what you are asking, in requesting me to help you to marry Nadia? You may wish to forget your rank but the rest of the world will not.'

'You cannot tell me the truth of the matter?' Léon said, and his eyes dark and brooding gazed steadily into Desborough's. 'As you say, perhaps I did not quite realize what kind of a man Nadia's father was. I only thought I knew.'

A little ironic smile flickered across Desborough's face for an instant, then he bowed.

'Perhaps you will be kind enough to make the interview with my daughter as brief as possible?' he said and turned on his heel.

Before he had reached the door he felt his shoulder seized; wheeling sharply round he found Léon at his side, dark face alight, eyes shining with an emotion Desborough could not understand.

The younger man spoke first and there was a thrill in his voice that would have startled those men who pronounced him cold.

‘Do you think I did not know the truth,’ he said and held out his hand. ‘I ask your pardon for testing you. It was unworthy. Anne had told me but I wished to judge for myself. Mr. Desborough’—his tone was formal once more—‘if you will give Nadia to me I shall be proud to marry the daughter of so gallant a gentleman.’

Desborough, after the English fashion, cut the scene very short; he resented the repeated attack upon his emotions that these last few days had brought forth; while Léon knew no reason to hide his feelings and startled him considerably by kissing him on both cheeks and hurrying out of the room to dress.

Forty minutes later he was at Kirkland’s bungalow demanding to see Nadia, and Nadia, who had just gone to dress, sent word she would not keep him a moment, and proceeded with her toilet faster than ever before in her life.

She came down some ten minutes or so before any one else could be expected to arrive and went into the drawing-room. Léon was standing at the far end of the room looking at a photograph and entirely oblivious of the fact that he was holding it upside down, and at the sound of Nadia’s entrance he turned and saw her. He had meant to go across to her but his knees shook under him and he took hold of the table to steady himself, while Nadia seeing him so rigidly still

bit her lip and summoned her sense of justice to her aid.

Walking straight across the room to him, she spoke very quietly.

‘Mr. Dare, I have done you in thought a great injustice and because of that I was very rude to you. Injustice is the thing I cannot bear and I ask your pardon.’

For one second she wondered what he would do, then she saw his eyes blaze, and the next she was crushed in his arms and his lips were pressed to hers in a fierce kiss that sent a thrill as of fire through her nerves.

Not till she was breathless and trembling did he take his lips away, and then with them close to hers he spoke in a fierce shaking whisper :

‘Nadia—I love you—love you—I have loved you and wanted you till I was nearly mad. I shall never know a moment’s peace till you are my wife—I am on fire—burning—feel my heart—feel it——’

He seized her hand and pressed it beneath his coat and she could feel the leaping thud of his heart beneath her fingers ; after that moment he spoke again.

‘You must give me your love—I love you so that you cannot deny me. I’ve waited—I’ve been patient. I have not worried you—I left you when I saw you did not want me and I would not—I would have tried not—to speak to you now. But you sent for me. You said you wanted to speak to me at once and that can only mean one thing. You are not cruel. I thought

you were once, but you have told me there was a reason—you could not play with me. Nadia ! Nadia ! You will marry me ? Tell me—do not keep me waiting any longer.'

His voice was almost choked. Nadia felt overwhelmed by the storm of passion and emotion her coming had aroused ; he was unrestrained because he believed her to love him as he loved her and to him there was no shame in letting the expression of that love be known. There was something almost threatening in his manner and the way he held her crushed against him and yet something protective—perhaps by reason of its immense strength. Suddenly Nadia felt a sense of suffocation—a singing came in her ears and she moved her hands vaguely, trying to release herself, and as if his spirit sensed her need almost before she herself knew it, he relaxed his grip of her and drew her down on a couch beside him. A rush of tenderness overcame him and the tears sprang to his eyes. Keeping his arm behind her shoulders he pressed her gently down upon the cushions and dropped on one knee beside the couch gazing at her adoringly.

'How I love you, how I love you !' he whispered. 'Nadia—Nadia—Nadia——'

He put his face close to hers heedless of wet lashes.

'I will care for you and protect you and give up my whole life to you. It shall be the desire of my heart to serve you—speak to me !'

His tenderness moved the depths of her as his passion

had not done ; not till this moment did she realize what she felt for him, and once realized, she hesitated no longer. Lifting her arms she drew his head down and pressed her lips to his.

Chapter XXI

DINNER was nearly over and Marie had glanced more than once from Nadia to Léon wondering if her surmise were correct ; she had never before seen Nadia so radiant or Léon so moved. For he watched Nadia with eyes that blazed and hardly spoke to any one at the table, yet the meal was gayer than most, for the visitors to Fort Amrah were many and Marie was doing her share of entertaining.

When dinner was over Léon rose with the ladies and looked across at Marie.

‘ May I come with you ? ’ he said, and without waiting for permission followed them into the drawing-room. There he looked at his hostess.

‘ Would it be possible for Mr. Desborough to come to us presently ? ’ he said. ‘ I know he is a person of importance to-night, but I must speak with him either now or later to-night. Before we leave—in Miss Desborough’s presence. You will permit it ? ’

‘ Why, surely yes ! I will see that Keith’s study is at your service. It may be late, but that will not matter I suppose.’

‘ No. I thank you. Why—here is Jim already.’

Desborough entered the room as he spoke and Marie rose to her feet.

'Have your talk now,' she said. 'There will not be a better opportunity. I will sit in the study for a while.'

'Turn you out of your own drawing-room? We would hardly do that. My words are not private from you—Jim—Nadia has done me a great honour. She has promised to marry me!'

Marie gave a little gasp and looked at Nadia. Desborough's lips tightened and for a moment he stood rigidly still. Then he spoke.

'Does she know?' he asked, and Léon went to Nadia as she stood and took her two hands.

'Nadia, my beloved,' he said, quite heedless of the other two, speaking very rapidly yet with a tenderness in his voice that thrilled his hearers. 'Your guardian wishes me to tell you something about myself. You will not be hurt that I did not tell you before?'

Nadia's eyes met his.

'The only thing that could hurt me now is for you to tell me that you do not love me,' she said, and Desborough clenched his hands as he watched them—utterly oblivious of Marie and himself. To them only the one supreme fact of their love mattered and it was so great that beside it everything else became insignificant—so tremendous that no embarrassment nor shame could exist in its presence. It was superb—but it held anguish for those who stood by.

At Nadia's answer Léon's eyes darkened and his

hands tightened on hers ; nevertheless he spoke quietly.

‘ Even Death will not cause me to say that,’ he said, ‘ because Death will only enable us to love more. It is nothing to do with our love, my dearest heart, but it is something to do with our life. You have heard me speak of Alania—you know I am Alanian born—my mother was a Frenchwoman, very lovely, very young when she died. My father is the brother of King Christian of Alania. That is all—but it was necessary—so your guardian said—that you should know.’

For an instant Nadia drew back, amazed, trying to realize the whole meaning of what he had told her. Then she spoke.

‘ You have asked me to be your wife ? ’ she said ‘ You—a prince of a reigning house ? ’

‘ I have prayed you to grant me that supreme happiness,’ he said very low. ‘ You will not love me less because I need it more ? Because I need it so utterly ? You could not fail me—you——’

She read the sudden fear in his eyes and drove back all the amazement and surprise in her own.

‘ I will never fail you ! ’ she said and her voice rang. ‘ In life or death I will love you as you desire.’

Chapter XXII

AS they rode back together just before dawn, Léon spoke of Anne.

‘ My cousin came no further than Alexandria,’ he said. ‘ I sent a wireless to the ship and had a reply from off Malta. Here it is.’

He passed the flimsy slip of paper over and Desborough took it without a word. He felt strangely dull and heavy, and he was faintly surprised that the mention of Anne did not move him more. Aware that there was much to be said however, he pulled himself together after a few moments.

‘ What are your plans ? ’ he asked. ‘ I suppose you and Nadia have made some.’

‘ I should like the marriage to take place at once but Nadia refuses. She wishes for three months at least.’

‘ She’s right. If this is to be, it must not be a hole and corner affair. You will I imagine, have to gain His Majesty’s consent ? ’

‘ Yes. I shall leave for Europe by the next boat and go straight to Alania. You will bring Nadia to England directly your work here is over ? ’

‘ Yes. I hope to get away in about three weeks. Where are you intending to live ? ’

‘ I must spend three months at least, each year, in Alania, but we wish to make a home in London, with an appartement in Paris and divide most of our time between the two. I shall write to Sir Francis Gaunt but not till you have done so. Anyhow it means my leaving India almost immediately.’

Desborough nodded and the conversation was kept strictly to Léon’s affairs till the bungalow was reached and the two bid each other good night.

Contrary to his expectation Desborough slept heavily and did not wake till Lehr Khan stood beside him calling his name over and over again. Then he lay for a minute or two thinking that this waking was almost the last before his work was formally completed and his stay in India was nearly over. Such musing was unprofitable and he rose and went to his bath conscious of a dull headache and wondering if he were in for an attack of fever. Bath and breakfast made him feel better however, and his ride in the cool crisp air banished the last remnants of malaise. He was just approaching the camp when to his amazement he saw no less a person than Nadia sitting Kirkland’s big chestnut, and Kirkland’s groom at a little distance.

Directly she saw him she rode across and held out her hand.

‘ Jim dear, I had to congratulate you and wish you well on the first morning I was here. It’s fine, dear, fine ! ’

Something of his pain of mind was healed by her words ; her tender thought for him brought a warmth to his heart.

‘ That is like you,’ he said and slipping from the saddle gave his horse to the servant. ‘ Dismount and walk round with me.’

She obeyed with alacrity and walked beside him, a slim tall figure in well-cut coat and white breeches, her eyes alight with happiness, a new spring and liveness in every movement

They had left the horses and servants behind them and were walking along the stony track to the camp, above was the clear blue of the winter sky, around them silence, space, loneliness. Half a mile or so ahead the camp swarmed, but where they were all was empty and peaceful ; and when they reached a piece of rock lying by the roadside, he drew her to sit down by his side.

‘ This is the only chance we have of a few minutes quiet,’ he said. ‘ Let’s stay here for ten minutes. I told Pir Khan not to follow us for half-an-hour so we can take our time walking on to the camp. You will not be tired ? ’

‘ Tired ? ’ she laughed and looked at him, then grew suddenly grave.

‘ Jim,’ she said. ‘ There’s one thing I want to say. I feel I’ve been very selfish and I feel too that in some way you are unhappy. I have no right to ask any fuller confidence than you have given me, yet in some way I am sure life has gone awry with you—more than at

Thorswood when—when you told me something of what had happened. Am I right, Jim ? ’

He pressed the arm he held closer to his side.

‘ Yes, you are right,’ he said. ‘ But I cannot talk about it yet—even to you. Not because I won’t—because I can’t. Some day I will tell you.’

‘ It is not in any way through me ? ’

‘ Through you ? ’ he smiled a little into her anxious eyes. ‘ Why Nadia, you are the one joy I have in the world—and that brings me to something. You have a brilliant future, dear—I have not yet told you how glad I am for your happiness . . . or what that happiness means to me. . . . I have never told you how very dear you are to me. . . . I want to tell you now but I cannot . . . you are all I have, Nadia.’

He paused a second—pressing her hand down on his knee, his hand gripping hers with a force that made her wince ; then went on, not looking at her but straight ahead over the wide spaces green now in the brief spell of cool.

‘ I am leaving India directly this is all over—three weeks or so—and we will go straight to London. Léon tells me the wedding is to be in three months. We will talk of details later. This morning I want only to tell you that your happiness is the dearest thing in the world to me.’

He turned a little and faced her.

‘ My dear—’ he said. ‘ God bless you——’

She made a quick movement and drawing her close he kissed her, a long tender kiss that startled her, and

then dropped his head on her shoulder and hid his eyes against her neck. Close to her ear she heard an unsteady whisper.

‘Let me stay here—just a minute——’

She rested her cheek against his head, moved to the depths of her being by the appeal of his weakness—so unexpected in him, of all people, and somewhere near a lark rose from the corn singing joyously. The next moment Desborough raised his head.

‘I don’t know what’s the matter with me,’ he said, smiling rather wryly. ‘I feel limp as a kitten and damned sorry for myself. You are restful, Nadia—it’s a rare quality. Don’t lose it. Now having done my little whine we’ll proceed.’

He rose abruptly, took her hands and pulled her to her feet and met her anxious eyes.

‘Don’t look so worried over me,’ he said. ‘I’m all right . . . only a bit fagged . . . and we’ll have time together on the voyage home.’

‘And after that,’ Nadia said quickly : ‘As we are on the subject of the future, Jim, I want to ask you just this—don’t live far away. Let us be together as much as we can. I don’t want those long partings ever to happen again—don’t let my marriage separate us. Let us draw closer not further apart. Léon loves you as one man seldom loves another . . . he has already asked me to tell you this in his name as well as mine. Live near us—let us join together in every way we can. Here are the horses—I’ll sentimentalize no longer.’

She laughed, quick to appreciate his annoyance at

his own momentary weakness and he nodded and took her outstretched hand.

‘Right, Nadia. I promise. I was fool enough to be depressed at the thought of losing you but that’s over. I don’t intend to lose you. Pir Khan!’

He signed to the man who brought up the horses, mounted her and sprang to his saddle and together they rode off.

Chapter XXIII

ONE day more.

Desborough had given his last command and told Lehr Khan he should not want him again that night. Hayward had gone to bed and at his own desire he was alone in the bungalow going through a last few papers. It was getting on for midnight and a dark night with no moon. He was just about to turn in when there came a knock and opening the door of the hut he saw on the verandah one of his native foremen who stammered out a message. There had been a fight of some sort at the further side of the camp, a man was killed. Would the Presence say what was to be done.

The Presence said many things and went off to look at the victim who lay in a tent and groaned at intervals being not dead but very badly injured—so badly that surgical aid was necessary. Desborough damned him vigorously, sent for his horse and rode off to the cantonment for Kirkland.

As the case was at the eastern side of the camp and his own bungalow on the western, Desborough sent Kirkland on and rode on alone for the last half mile.

He had nearly reached the outskirts of the camp and was just passing by a patch of scrub some five or six feet high when his horse stumbled heavily, and before he could recover came down with him.

He rolled clear and was up almost at the instant, but even as King Harry plunged to his feet, man and horse were surrounded by half-a-dozen silent figures. Desborough knew he was trapped and whipped out his revolver but it was too late. A rag was thrust in his mouth, his arms were seized and tied behind his back ; the next moment he was hoisted across a saddle bow in front of an evil-smelling tribesman and carried off.

It had all happened so quickly that only the intense discomfort of his position and the vile taste of the dirty gag assured Desborough he was not dreaming ; when at last after some half hour's riding his captor pulled up he tried vainly to wrench himself free. The result was a blow on the head and he sank down into darkness.

He lost all count of time and only opened his eyes at last to find himself in a big stone-built room, softly carpeted and curtained, with the sunlight stabbing in through slits high in the walls in shafts of bright gold.

He moved cautiously, his head swimming and raising himself on his elbow looked about him ; the room was empty, luxuriously furnished with divans and cushions, but even as he moved the curtains at the further end parted, and a tall grey-bearded figure entered, clad in a magnificent robe of purple broidered with gold and

wine colour and a pale green turban with a tall diamond aigrette pinned in with a ruby brooch. For the moment in the dimness Desborough did not recognize him, then he struggled to his feet for the newcomer was Gulab Singh.

With a swift movement the latter signed to him to keep still, and crossing the room sat down opposite to him.

‘Mr. Desborough, I must offer my regrets for any rough handling you have received and beg you to believe that it was not by my orders.’

The faultless English sounded strange from a figure so entirely that of the Eastern potentate, and Desborough passed his hand across his eyes to clear them, whereupon Gulab Singh clapped his hands and a servant appeared carrying a silver tray with an English cut-glass flagon upon it and two wonderful goblets carved apparently from lumps of solid jade.

Without waiting for an order the servant poured out some sparkling wine and the Maharajah himself placed one on a little table beside his dazed guest.

‘Drink, Mr. Desborough,’ he said as the servant withdrew. ‘You need something to clear your brain after the unfortunate behaviour of my fools of servants, and this is quite harmless. See I will taste from your cup.’

He did so, raising the cup to the light streaming through showing the wonderful hues of the blood-red wine in its green embrace.

‘Drink, Mr. Desborough,’ he repeated. ‘Drink to

the health of a man who betrayed a trust many years ago . . . ah, I see you have not forgotten. Neither have I. We of the East do not forget.'

Desborough drew one quick breath.

'May I ask your Highness two questions before I drink?' he asked and his eyes met Gulab Singh's steadily; the other bowed.

'But most certainly! Speak on.'

'First then, where am I?'

'In the house of one of my acquaintances—in Peshawur.'

'Secondly, why have you waited all these years?'

There was a moment's silence, then Gulab Singh smiled.

'I wished to give you every chance to clear yourself, Mr. Desborough—and I had no wish to act save as you yourself acted. You chose to injure my honour in betraying a State secret. I chose to wait until you had completed a task that crowned your reputation before I avenged that honour. Mr. Desborough, you will not drink? I have proved to you it is not poisoned.'

He smiled and Desborough picked up the goblet and drained it; no man should hint twice that he feared to drink with him. The wine cleared his brain and steadied his nerves and Gulab Singh signed approval.

'Now we can talk. Mr. Desborough, in twenty-seven hours from now—it is just seven—the electric signal at the camp will be pressed by the Governor of the Punjaub, the sluices will open and the water will enter

the canal. Your work is accomplished. So is mine. Directly the full weight of water passes over the bridge it will reach a certain spot in the wall where an opening has been left—oh, only a crack, Mr. Desborough, even you could not discover it. The water will enter that crack—it may take three minutes to reach its goal—there may be a muffled explosion—no one will heed—and the embankment and bridge go down together. Faulty construction somewhere—a weak spot—a mathematical error as to the pressure of high water—who can tell? It suffices that beneath its test your work fails.'

At the first few words Desborough had started forward with a smothered cry, but something held him back and sitting on the edge of the divan, eyes dilated, breath coming fast, he listened to the plan that would wreck his life. And Gulab Singh sat watching him, his hawk eyes gleaming, a cruel little smile playing about his bearded lips. As Desborough did not speak, he himself broke the silence.

'Is my plan not well conceived, Mr. Desborough?'

Between dry lips then Desborough spoke.

'I swore to you, long ago, that I knew nothing of your lost papers.'

He did not know why he said that; to plead for mercy was useless, but he felt he must make one effort to save his work—and Gulab Singh smiled again.

'You could not explain to me then how those papers came to be missing. Can you explain now?'

'You know I cannot. I can only repeat what I said

then. I neither touched the cabinet nor the papers. Your plan is well conceived, Gulab Singh. You destroy the life of your countrymen for the sake of private revenge.'

'Oh no—not revenge,' Gulab Singh's tone vibrated. 'I avenge my honour. I can conceive that to be beyond the understanding of an Englishman.'

The words with their deadly insult vibrated in the silent room ; for an instant Desborough was rigid, then with a choking cry he sprang at the other's throat.

The next minutes half-a-dozen servants were hanging on to him, and Gulab Singh was rising to his feet, his face ivory white, his eyes blazing, his hands trembling as they re-arranged the twisted silk about his throat.

'So that is the way you take it ?' he said and his cold rage shook him as the storm shakes a tree. 'I had thought only to destroy but your honour . . . but no man shall strike me and live. . . . Mal-ad-Din !'

A small man clad in dull blue stepped forward and the Maharajah spoke to him in sharp snapping sentences, whereupon he bowed low and hurried out. The next moment Desborough was dragged violently back and held by his guards and a dead silence descended upon the waiting assembly.

There was not long to wait Two men came in carrying a brazier of charcoal and behind them another bearing some instrument that he kept more or less hidden, and over the Maharajah's face a curious little tremor passed. He gave one glance at his prisoner and Desborough met it without flinching, but his

nostrils dilated and he drew a long breath like a man who is about to dive in deep water.

At a sign from their master Desborough's captors thrust him into a chair and bound his arms behind him ; in two minutes he could move neither hand nor foot and the men stepped back.

Gulab Singh turned to the little man he had called Mal-ad-Din ; Desborough did not understand the language, it seemed some kind of bastard Arabic, but he understood the meaning of the scene very well. He was a brave man but it needs more than bravery to face torture unmoved. Despite himself the sweat broke out on his forehead, and he cursed inwardly lest Gulab Singh should have the triumph of seeing the cold moisture that betrayed him, but if Gulab Singh did see, he took no heed. Calm and composed once more he gave another order and Mal-ad-Din approached.

Desborough bit his lips to stifle the wild appeal that rose in his throat ; he could feel the heat from the white-hot iron upon his face, the next instant he would feel it upon his shrinking flesh . . . the awful fear seized him that he might shriek for mercy and betray his race . . . he tried to swallow but his throat and tongue were dry and rough. Nearer and nearer came that dreadful white-hot prong, the heat seared his temple with a stabbing flame though yet it had not touched him—and Gulab Singh came across the room and stood before him.

' You are a brave man, Mr. Desborough . . . and I honour bravery. But you have laid hands on me—

me'—his voice shook—'and I suffer no man to do that and go free to tell my shame. I thought to wring an appeal from you—to make you coward as well as traitor, and thus to avenge myself. I have failed. Go !'

He signed to the men who stood by and Mal-ad-Din drew back, but before they had reached the further end of the room there arose a muffled commotion, followed by the sound of cries and blows, the next instant the heavy curtains were dashed aside and a man rushed in, panting from the struggle, his cloak half ripped from his shoulders, his turban torn from his white head.

'Oh, Gulab Singh—Lord of a thousand worlds!—do not this thing! He is innocent—the white man is innocent! Grant thy servant hearing! I will tell thee all!'

He flung himself on the floor at the Maharajah's feet and Desborough breathing unsteadily stared at the dishevelled head—was he mad or dreaming? This man who knelt there was Guggoo, the workman of the great bridge but the voice was the voice of one long since surely dead—and the Maharajah had stooped and was lifting up the ragged wizened figure and embracing it.

'Gukar Ali! Gukar Ali! Gukar Ali! the friend of my youth. Thou who wert dead hast come back to me! God is great and merciful. To Him be praise!'

His voice rang out in the awed silence of the room and Gukar lifted his hands and blessed him. Then turning, came over to Desborough and spoke aloud:

‘ This man is innocent, oh, Highness ! The deed whereof he is accused he did not do. May I give orders that he be released, oh, Gulab Singh, lord of all the world ? ’

The next minute Desborough’s bonds were cut and his wrenched arms free but the ordeal had been too severe ; even as his bewildered gaze rested on the face of the man he had known so long—Guggoo, workman and peasant, Gukar Ali, sometime Prime Minister of Gulkor and intimate friend of one of the greatest princes of India, so his overstrained nerves gave way, the room with its lights and colours receded into the distance, there was a roaring in his ears, a great blackness before his eyes and he sank helplessly into the shadow.

Chapter XXIV

DESBOROUGH struggled back to consciousness to find himself lying on a wide stone balcony, the cool strong breeze playing over his face, and beside him Lehr Khan squatting on the stone and watching him with dog-like fidelity. Very slowly, with infinite effort he was so weary, he spoke.

‘The bridge—tell me——’

‘Is carrying the water of life to the parched land and bearing upon it the blessings of the universe . . . Sahib . . . my Sahib, thou art better? Drink this and strength will come. It is a strong cordial. . . .’

He held a gold-rimmed cup to his master’s lips and Desborough swallowed with difficulty ; it was a strange liquid faintly reminiscent of curaçoa and it bit into his stomach like fire, sending the blood coursing through his veins and reviving the weakened heart. He longed to speak but Lehr Khan would not utter a word until he had eaten the food that was prepared, then he went into the room from which the balcony led and the next moment Colonel Hewitt came out and with him Nadia herself. She gave a little cry as she saw him and running forward dropped on her knee by his side and put her

arm round him. Leaning against her he heard the story she told.

‘When you could not be found the next morning there was a dreadful scene—your horse was found ten miles away and there was no trace of you whatever. It seemed you had been spirited off the earth! I went straight to Colonel Hewitt and told him the whole story but Gulab Singh declared he knew nothing of you. He said he had not seen you since he left England and we were obliged to pretend to believe him . . . Meanwhile it was too late to stop the ceremony and we were nearly mad, Léon and I . . . troops were sent out to look for you . . . the countryside was scoured, and all the while I knew—I knew—oh, Jim!’

She broke off a moment and hid her face against him, and Hewitt took up the tale.

‘It seemed practically certain that it was Gulab Singh’s doing but we could prove nothing—then about sunset when we were getting desperate he himself arrived in a huge Rolls Royce and demanded to see Rowe and Hayward and myself. Sir George Miller had just arrived, he was due to come the night before and when Gulab Singh heard, nothing would serve but he must see him too. There was a fine commotion but he got his way, and when we were all together he told us an extraordinary tale.

First he admitted that you were in a house of his in Peshawur, that by his orders you had been waylaid and carried off the night before; he told us of all that happened when you were in Kashmir twenty odd years

ago—everything. You know what happened then. It seems that this old man Gukar Ali whose life you had saved, saw on the night that you slept in the room at the Maharajah's summer palace a most strange thing. He saw the Maharajah enter the room, go straight to the cabinet, open it and take out a roll of papers. Guessing all was not well he followed him out of the room, down various corridors into the gardens and along a winding path to a little stone temple. There Gulab Singh, looking neither to right nor left, stooped and after a moment or two's fumbling, lifted a stone in the floor revealing beneath a small secret place. He hid the papers in a casket that stood there, replaced the stone and walked back. Gukar Ali drew behind a tree as he approached and as the moonlight fell upon his face he saw his eyes, though open, saw nothing—he was asleep.

Trembling lest harm should befall he followed him back to the palace, saw him enter his own apartment and lie down upon his bed. Then Gukar Ali left him.

It seems he often chose to walk about his private gardens at night and dispensed with any guards save his own personal servant; this servant after a long day's attendance had fallen asleep and so saw neither his master's departure nor return.

A fortnight later came the discovery of the loss. Gukar Ali was at the time in Thibet and on a bed of sickness; his memory gone as you already know; when he returned six months later the matter had, as he believed, been allowed to drop and Gulab Singh

and his young wife were in Paris. Then came the Maharanee's sudden death from pneumonia and Gulab Singh was unapproachable. For years he did not return to India. He recovered his memory by degrees but it was only recently he grew to remember all. What to do he did not know. It would have been easy to tell Gulab Singh at first but after many years it was not so easy. He might not have been believed and he could not bear to lower his beloved master's pride. Then he conceived the idea of watching you. So he became Guggoo the hillman. Remember, you had saved his life at the imminent risk of your life and if India never forgets vengeance, she equally never forgets gratitude. He watched you or had you watched, he made himself acquainted with every movement of his late master's, and because he loved and venerated that master he compromised and told neither him nor you, the truth. Then came word that Gulab Singh would use the means to his hand and hide his plans beneath the tribesmen's attack. That failed as you know and Gukar Ali came back to you knowing that the next attempt would be surer. It was. He was on his way to warn you when Lehr Khan met him and told of your disappearance. Whereupon he demanded to be motored to Peshawur swearing by all his gods that he could save you. You know what followed . . . when you lost consciousness an English doctor was fetched and Gukar Ali told all the truth to Gulab Singh. Gulab Singh sent instructions to Kashmir and this morning the reply came back. There, mouldering

away beneath the temple floor were the missing papers.

It's beyond me to describe what he feels. Like all his race he's as proud as Lucifer when it comes to showing his real feelings. There is the whole story. Now ask what questions you want.'

Desborough sat upright, still holding Nadia's hand closely in his but no longer finding it needful to lean against her for support.

'First and foremost—how long have I been ill and what's been the matter?'

'Three days. Sheer overstrain coming on top of the fighting we had. Next?'

'The most important of all. Gulab Singh told me of a device to wreck the canal—that's between four walls remember—when the water-pressure should touch it. Lehr Khan tells me all is well. What happened?'

'Gukar Ali and half-a-dozen other fellas asked permission of Hayward to fiddle about with a stone on one of the walls. Hayward and I saw it all done. It took about an hour and the only ones who knew why a certain stone was taken out and cemented in again only twenty-four hours before the canal was to be opened, were just the old monkey-man and myself.'

'Miller doesn't know?'

'Not a word! And unless you choose to make trouble for Gulab Singh he never will. It's for you to decide. He's a big man and an important figure in England as well as India—but he nearly wrecked you

and your works for the sake of private vengeance. Do as you think fit, Desborough. I shall uphold you whatever it is.'

For a long moment no one spoke ; then Desborough looked at Nadia. She smiled and he turned back to Hewitt.

'Colonel, will you ask Gulab Singh to come and talk to me?' he said. 'And if you two'll forgive me I'll see him alone.'

Nadia rose, bent down and kissed him, then went swiftly within doors followed by Hewitt. Two minutes later Gulab Singh pushed the curtains aside and came out on to the balcony. His iron-grey beard was nearly white, his fine shoulders were bowed like those of an old man ; not till Desborough spoke his name did he move. Then he came forward, and Desborough spoke.

'The past is past, Highness,' he said speaking in the vernacular. 'Let it bury itself. We are not women to argue. We are men with work to do. Is it well?'

Very slowly Gulab Singh raised his eyes and met Desborough's, and Desborough realized with something of a shock that he was an old man—aged in a night. A little unsteadily he rose to his feet for he was still weak, and held out his hand.

'Will your Highness refuse to speak to me?' he asked with a little smile, and Gulab Singh bent his white head.

'It is not for me to speak,' he said, and despite his pride his voice shook. 'I have wrought great evil against an innocent man. What vengeance is desired

shall be accomplished even to my life. Lay thy commands upon me. By the great God who made us both I swear they shall be obeyed ! ’

For a moment Desborough made no reply ; he was moved more than he chose to acknowledge even to himself. Then in English he spoke hurriedly.

‘ Then let there be no further talk of vengeance, Prince. Let the past go—it’s over and done with and I want to forget it. Let me leave India with only friends behind me.’

He held out his hand and the other grasped it and bending his head laid his forehead upon it ; then straightening himself looked Desborough in the eyes.

‘ May God send many men such as you to my beloved country ! ’ he said. ‘ We shall meet in London, Mr. Desborough. Perhaps then I may be able to find words to express what I feel ; to-day I cannot—my heart is too full.’

He bowed very low, then turned on his heel and walked away, and Desborough leant back against his cushions horribly tired.

So it was all over—the work, the danger, the anxiety and what was left ? He faced the future and found it empty, and in far-away Alania the woman he loved must go lonely all her days. Life had beaten him after all. Even his work seemed ended, younger men than he would take his place, his achievements were of the past.

Quite unconscious that his pessimistic reflections were merely the outcome of his physical weakness he

descended into even deeper gloom till Nadia's voice aroused his attention.

' Jim ! ' she said. ' When do we sail for England ? I want to build castles in the air and the biggest castle is for you—and oh, here's a letter for you. Open it quickly and then let us talk.'

He glanced at the official looking envelope, opened it and read a lengthy screed ; then he looked up and the weariness had gone from his face.

' An offer of work—big work for me ! ' he said. ' Yes, sit down, Nadia—let me tell you all about it.'





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